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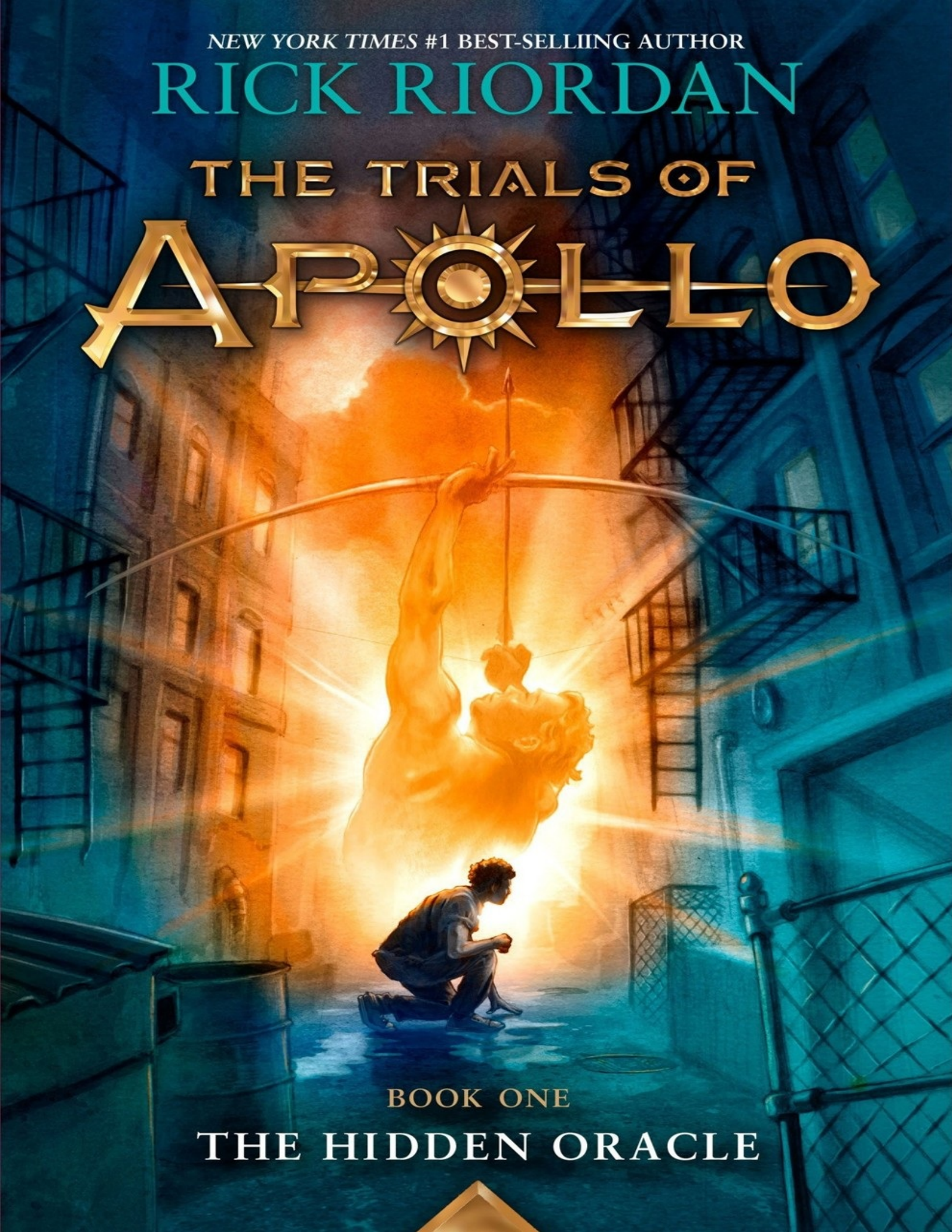
RICK RIORDAN

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO



BOOK ONE

THE HIDDEN ORACLE

RICK RIORDAN

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

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THE HIDDEN ORACLE

Disney • HYPERION
Los Angeles New York

Also by Rick Riordan

Percy Jackson and the Olympians
Book One: *The Lightning Thief*
Book Two: *The Sea of Monsters*
Book Three: *The Titan's Curse*
Book Four: *The Battle of the Labyrinth*
Book Five: *The Last Olympian*

The Demigod Files

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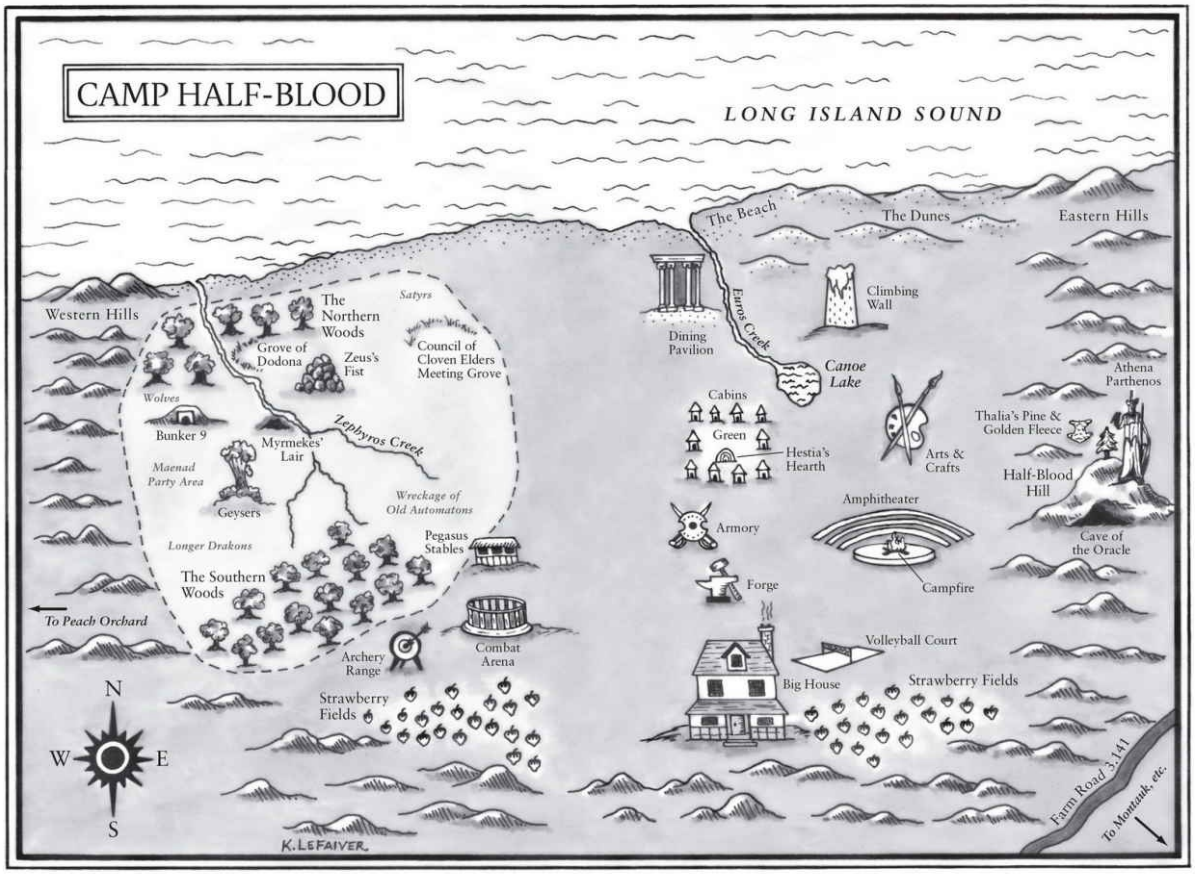
To the Muse Calliope

This is long overdue. Please don't hurt me.


CAMP HALF-BLOOD
LONG ISLAND SOUND
The Beach
The Dunes
Eastern Hills
Western Hills
The Northern Woods
Satyrs
Grove of Dodona
Zeus's Fist
Council of Cloven Elders Meeting Grove
Wolves
Bunker 9
Myrmekes' Lair
Zephyros Creek
Maenad Party Area
Geysers
Wreckage of Old Automatons
Longer Drakons
Pegasus Stables
The Southern Woods
To Peach Orchard
Archery Range
Combat Arena
Strawberry Fields
N
W
E
S
K. LEFAIVER
Dining Pavilion
Eurus Creek
Climbing Wall
Canoe Lake
Cabins
Green
Hestia's Hearth
Arts & Crafts
Athena Parthenos
Thalia's Pine & Golden Fleece
Half-Blood Hill
Cave of the Oracle
Armory
Amphitheater
Campfire
Forge
Volleyball Court
Big House
Strawberry Fields
Farm Road 3.141
To Montauk, etc.

1

Hoodlums punch my face
I would smite them if I could
Mortality blows

MY NAME IS APOLLO. I used to be a god.

In my four thousand six hundred and twelve years, I have done many things. I inflicted a plague on the Greeks who besieged Troy. I blessed Babe Ruth with three home runs in game four of the 1926 World Series. I visited my wrath upon Britney Spears at the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards.

But in all my immortal life, I never before crash-landed in a Dumpster.

I'm not even sure how it happened.

I simply woke up falling. Skyscrapers spiraled in and out of view. Flames streamed off my body. I tried to fly. I tried to change into a cloud or teleport across the world or do a hundred other things that should have been easy for me, but I just kept falling. I plunged into a narrow canyon between two buildings and *BAM!*

Is anything sadder than the sound of a god hitting a pile of garbage bags?

I lay groaning and aching in the open Dumpster. My nostrils burned with the stench of rancid bologna and used diapers. My ribs felt broken, though that shouldn't have been possible.

My mind stewed in confusion, but one memory floated to the surface—the voice of my father, Zeus: *YOUR FAULT. YOUR PUNISHMENT.*

I realized what had happened to me. And I sobbed in despair.

Even for a god of poetry such as myself, it is difficult to describe how I felt. How could you—a mere mortal—possibly understand? Imagine being stripped of your clothes, then blasted with a fire hose in front of a laughing crowd. Imagine the ice-cold water filling your mouth and lungs, the pressure bruising your skin, turning your joints to putty. Imagine feeling helpless, ashamed,

completely vulnerable—publicly and brutally stripped of everything that makes you *you*. My humiliation was worse than that.

YOUR FAULT, Zeus's voice rang in my head.

"No!" I cried miserably. "No, it wasn't! Please!"

Nobody answered. On either side of me, rusty fire escapes zigzagged up brick walls. Above, the winter sky was gray and unforgiving.

I tried to remember the details of my sentencing. Had my father told me how long this punishment would last? What was I supposed to do to regain his favor?

My memory was too fuzzy. I could barely recall what Zeus looked like, much less why he'd decided to toss me to earth. There'd been a war with the giants, I thought. The gods had been caught off guard, embarrassed, almost defeated.

The only thing I knew for certain: my punishment was unfair. Zeus needed someone to blame, so of course he'd picked the handsomest, most talented, most popular god in the pantheon: me.

I lay in the garbage, staring at the label inside the Dumpster lid: FOR PICK-UP, CALL 1-555-STENCHY.

Zeus will reconsider, I told myself. *He's just trying to scare me. Any moment, he will yank me back to Olympus and let me off with a warning.*

"Yes…" My voice sounded hollow and desperate. "Yes, that's it."

I tried to move. I wanted to be on my feet when Zeus came to apologize. My ribs throbbed. My stomach clenched. I clawed the rim of the Dumpster and managed to drag myself over the side. I toppled out and landed on my shoulder, which made a cracking sound against the asphalt.

"Araggeeddeee," I whimpered through the pain. "Stand up. Stand up."

Getting to my feet was not easy. My head spun. I almost passed out from the effort. I stood in a dead-end alley. About fifty feet away, the only exit opened onto a street with grimy storefronts for a bail bondsman's office and a pawnshop. I was somewhere on the west side of Manhattan, I guessed, or perhaps Crown Heights, in Brooklyn. Zeus must have been really angry with me.

I inspected my new body. I appeared to be a teenaged Caucasian male, clad in sneakers, blue jeans, and a green polo shirt. How utterly *drab*. I felt sick, weak, and so, so human.

I will never understand how you mortals tolerate it. You live your entire life trapped in a sack of meat, unable to enjoy simple pleasures like changing into a hummingbird or dissolving into pure light.

And now, heavens help me, I was one of you—just another meat sack.

I fumbled through my pants pockets, hoping I still had the keys to my sun chariot. No such luck. I found a cheap nylon wallet containing a hundred dollars

in American currency—lunch money for my first day as a mortal, perhaps—along with a New York State junior driver's license featuring a photo of a dorky, curly-haired teen who could not possibly be me, with the name *Lester Papadopoulos.* The cruelty of Zeus knew no bounds!

I peered into the Dumpster, hoping my bow, quiver, and lyre might have fallen to earth with me. I would have settled for my harmonica. There was nothing.

I took a deep breath. *Cheer up,* I told myself. *I must have retained some of my godly abilities. Matters could be worse.*

A raspy voice called, "Hey, Cade, take a look at this loser."

Blocking the alley's exit were two young men: one squat and platinum blond, the other tall and redheaded. Both wore oversize hoodies and baggy pants. Serpentine tattoo designs covered their necks. All they were missing were the words I'M A THUG printed in large letters across their foreheads.

The redhead zeroed in on the wallet in my hand. "Now, be nice, Mikey. This guy looks friendly enough." He grinned and pulled a hunting knife from his belt. "In fact, I bet he wants to give us all his money."

I blame my disorientation for what happened next.

I knew my immortality had been stripped away, but I still considered myself the mighty Apollo! One cannot change one's way of thinking as easily as one might, say, turn into a snow leopard.

Also, on previous occasions when Zeus had punished me by making me mortal (yes, it had happened twice before), I had retained massive strength and at least some of my godly powers. I assumed the same would be true now.

I was *not* going to allow two young mortal ruffians to take Lester Papadopoulos's wallet.

I stood up straight, hoping Cade and Mikey would be intimidated by my regal bearing and divine beauty. (Surely those qualities could not be taken from me, no matter what my driver's license photo looked like.) I ignored the warm Dumpster juice trickling down my neck.

"I am Apollo," I announced. "You mortals have three choices: offer me tribute, flee, or be destroyed."

I wanted my words to echo through the alley, shake the towers of New York, and cause the skies to rain smoking ruin. None of that happened. On the word *destroyed,* my voice squeaked.

The redhead Cade grinned even wider. I thought how amusing it would be if I could make the snake tattoos around his neck come alive and strangle him to

death.

"What do you think, Mikey?" he asked his friend. "Should we give this guy tribute?"

Mikey scowled. With his bristly blond hair, his cruel small eyes, and his thick frame, he reminded me of the monstrous sow that terrorized the village of Crommyon back in the good old days.

"Not feeling the tribute, Cade." His voice sounded like he'd been eating lit cigarettes. "What were the other options?"

"Fleeing?" said Cade.

"Nah," said Mikey.

"Being destroyed?"

Mikey snorted. "How about we destroy *him* instead?"

Cade flipped his knife and caught it by the handle. "I can live with that. After you."

I slipped the wallet into my back pocket. I raised my fists. I did not like the idea of flattening mortals into flesh waffles, but I was sure I could do it. Even in my weakened state, I would be far stronger than any human.

"I warned you," I said. "My powers are far beyond your comprehension."

Mikey cracked his knuckles. "Uh-huh."

He lumbered forward.

As soon as he was in range, I struck. I put all my wrath into that punch. It should have been enough to vaporize Mikey and leave a thug-shaped impression on the asphalt.

Instead he ducked, which I found quite annoying.

I stumbled forward. I have to say that when Prometheus fashioned you humans out of clay he did a shoddy job. Mortal legs are clumsy. I tried to compensate, drawing upon my boundless reserves of agility, but Mikey kicked me in the back. I fell on my divine face.

My nostrils inflated like air bags. My ears popped. The taste of copper filled my mouth. I rolled over, groaning, and found the two blurry thugs staring down at me.

"Mikey," said Cade, "are you comprehending this guy's power?"

"Nah," said Mikey. "I'm not comprehending it."

"Fools!" I croaked. "I will destroy you!"

"Yeah, sure." Cade tossed away his knife. "But first I think we'll stomp you."

Cade raised his boot over my face, and the world went black.

2

A girl from nowhere
Completes my embarrassment
Stupid bananas

I HAD NOT BEEN STOMPED so badly since my guitar contest against Chuck Berry in 1957.

As Cade and Mikey kicked me, I curled into a ball, trying to protect my ribs and head. The pain was intolerable. I retched and shuddered. I blacked out and came to, my vision swimming with red splotches. When my attackers got tired of kicking me, they hit me over the head with a bag of garbage, which burst and covered me in coffee grounds and moldy fruit peels.

At last they stepped away, breathing heavily. Rough hands patted me down and took my wallet.

"Lookee here," said Cade. "Some cash and an ID for…Lester Papadopoulos."

Mikey laughed. "*Lester?* That's even worse than Apollo."

I touched my nose, which felt roughly the size and texture of a water-bed mattress. My fingers came away glistening red.

"Blood," I muttered. "That's not possible."

"It's very possible, Lester." Cade crouched next to me. "And there might be more blood in your near future. You want to explain why you don't have a credit card? Or a phone? I'd hate to think I did all that stomping for just a hundred bucks."

I stared at the blood on my fingertips. I was a god. I did not *have* blood. Even when I'd been turned mortal before, golden ichor still ran through my veins. I had never before been so…*converted.* It must be a mistake. A trick. Something.

I tried to sit up.

My hand hit a banana peel and I fell again. My attackers howled in delight.

“I love this guy!” Mikey said.

“Yeah, but the boss told us he’d be loaded,” Cade complained.

“Boss…” I muttered. “Boss?”

“That’s right, Lester.” Cade flicked a finger against the side of my head. “‘Go to that alley,’ the boss told us. ‘Easy score.’ He said we should rough you up, take whatever you had. But this”—he waved the cash under my nose—“this isn’t much of a payday.”

Despite my predicament, I felt a surge of hopefulness. If these thugs had been sent here to find me, their “boss” must be a god. No mortal could have known I would fall to earth at this spot. Perhaps Cade and Mikey were not human either. Perhaps they were cleverly disguised monsters or spirits. At least that would explain why they had beaten me so easily.

“Who—who is your boss?” I struggled to my feet, coffee grounds dribbling from my shoulders. My dizziness made me feel as if I were flying too close to the fumes of primordial Chaos, but I refused to be humbled. “Did Zeus send you? Or perhaps Ares? I demand an audience!”

Mikey and Cade looked at each other as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?*

Cade picked up his knife. “You don’t take a hint, do you, Lester?”

Mikey pulled off his belt—a length of bike chain—and wrapped it around his fist.

I decided to sing them into submission. They may have resisted my fists, but no mortal could resist my golden voice. I was trying to decide between “You Send Me” and an original composition, “I’m Your Poetry God, Baby,” when a voice yelled, “HEY!”

The hooligans turned. Above us, on the second-story fire escape landing, stood a girl of about twelve. “Leave him alone,” she ordered.

My first thought was that Artemis had come to my aid. My sister often appeared as a twelve-year-old girl for reasons I’d never fully understood. But something told me this was not she.

The girl on the fire escape did not exactly inspire fear. She was small and pudgy, with dark hair chopped in a messy pageboy style and black cat-eye glasses with rhinestones glittering in the corners. Despite the cold, she wore no coat. Her outfit looked like it had been picked by a kindergartener—red sneakers, yellow tights, and a green tank dress. Perhaps she was on her way to a costume party dressed as a traffic light.

Still…there was something fierce in her expression. She had the same obstinate scowl my old girlfriend Cyrene used to get whenever she wrestled lions.

Mikey and Cade did not seem impressed.

“Get lost, kid,” Mikey told her.

The girl stamped her foot, causing the fire escape to shudder. “My alley. My rules!” Her bossy nasal voice made her sound like she was chiding a playmate in a game of make-believe. “Whatever that loser has is mine, including his money!”

“Why is everyone calling me a loser?” I asked weakly. The comment seemed unfair, even if I was beat-up and covered in garbage; but no one paid me any attention.

Cade glared at the girl. The red from his hair seemed to be seeping into his face. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Beat it, you brat!” He picked up a rotten apple and threw it.

The girl didn’t flinch. The fruit landed at her feet and rolled harmlessly to a stop.

“You want to play with food?” The girl wiped her nose. “Okay.”

I didn’t see her kick the apple, but it came flying back with deadly accuracy and hit Cade in the nose. He collapsed on his rump.

Mikey snarled. He marched toward the fire escape ladder, but a banana peel seemed to slither directly into his path. He slipped and fell hard. “OWWW!”

I backed away from the fallen thugs. I wondered if I should make a run for it, but I could barely hobble. I also did not want to be assaulted with old fruit.

The girl climbed over the railing. She dropped to the ground with surprising nimbleness and grabbed a sack of garbage from the Dumpster.

“Stop!” Cade did a sort of scuttling crab walk to get away from the girl. “Let’s talk about this!”

Mikey groaned and rolled onto his back.

The girl pouted. Her lips were chapped. She had wispy black fuzz at the corners of her mouth.

“I don’t like you guys,” she said. “You should go.”

“Yeah!” Cade said. “Sure! Just…”

He reached for the money scattered among the coffee grounds.

The girl swung her garbage bag. In mid arc the plastic exploded, disgorging an impossible number of rotten bananas. They knocked Cade flat. Mikey was plastered with so many peels he looked like he was being attacked by carnivorous starfish.

“Leave my alley,” the girl said. “Now.”

In the Dumpster, more trash bags burst like popcorn kernels, showering Cade and Mikey with radishes, potato peelings, and other compost material. Miraculously, none of it got on me. Despite their injuries, the two thugs scrambled to their feet and ran away, screaming.

I turned toward my pint-size savior. I was no stranger to dangerous women. My sister could rain down arrows of death. My stepmother, Hera, regularly drove mortals mad so that they would hack each other to pieces. But this garbage-wielding twelve-year-old made me nervous.

"Thank you," I ventured.

The girl crossed her arms. On her middle fingers she wore matching gold rings with crescent signets. Her eyes glinted darkly like a crow's. (I can make that comparison because I invented crows.)

"Don't thank me," she said. "You're still in my alley."

She walked a full circle around me, scrutinizing my appearance as if I were a prize cow. (I can also make that comparison, because I used to collect prize cows.)

"You're the god Apollo?" She sounded less than awestruck. She also didn't seem fazed by the idea of gods walking among mortals.

"You were listening, then?"

She nodded. "You don't look like a god."

"I'm not at my best," I admitted. "My father, Zeus, has exiled me from Olympus. And who are you?"

She smelled faintly of apple pie, which was surprising, since she looked so grubby. Part of me wanted to find a fresh towel, clean her face, and give her money for a hot meal. Part of me wanted to fend her off with a chair in case she decided to bite me. She reminded me of the strays my sister was always adopting: dogs, panthers, homeless maidens, small dragons.

"Name is Meg," she said.

"Short for Megara? Or Margaret?"

"Margaret. But don't ever call me Margaret."

"And are you a demigod, Meg?"

She pushed up her glasses. "Why would you think that?"

Again she didn't seem surprised by the question. I sensed she had heard the term *demigod* before.

"Well," I said, "you obviously have some power. You chased off those hooligans with rotten fruit. Perhaps you have banana-kinesis? Or you can control garbage? I once knew a Roman goddess, Cloacina, who presided over the city's sewer system. Perhaps you're related…?"

Meg pouted. I got the impression I might have said something wrong, though I couldn't imagine what.

"I think I'll just take your money," Meg said. "Go on. Get out of here."

"No, wait!" Desperation crept into my voice. "Please, I—I may need a bit of assistance."

I felt ridiculous, of course. Me—the god of prophecy, plague, archery, healing, music, and several other things I couldn't remember at the moment—asking a colorfully dressed street urchin for help. But I had no one else. If this child chose to take my money and kick me into the cruel winter streets, I didn't think I could stop her.

"Say I believe you…" Meg's voice took on a singsong tone, as if she were about to announce the rules of the game: *I'll be the princess, and you'll be the scullery maid*. "Say I decide to help. What then?"

Good question, I thought. "We…we are in Manhattan?"

"Mm-hmm." She twirled and did a playful skip-kick. "Hell's Kitchen."

It seemed wrong for a child to say *Hell's Kitchen.* Then again, it seemed wrong for a child to live in an alley and have garbage fights with thugs.

I considered walking to the Empire State Building. That was the modern gateway to Mount Olympus, but I doubted the guards would let me up to the secret six hundredth floor. Zeus would not make it so easy.

Perhaps I could find my old friend Chiron the centaur. He had a training camp on Long Island. He could offer me shelter and guidance. But that would be a dangerous journey. A defenseless god makes for a juicy target. Any monster along the way would cheerfully disembowel me. Jealous spirits and minor gods might also welcome the opportunity. Then there was Cade and Mikey's mysterious "boss." I had no idea who he was, or whether he had other, worse minions to send against me.

Even if I made it to Long Island, my new mortal eyes might not be able to *find* Chiron's camp in its magically camouflaged valley. I needed a guide to get me there—someone experienced and close by….

"I have an idea." I stood as straight as my injuries allowed. It wasn't easy to look confident with a bloody nose and coffee grounds dripping off my clothes. "I know someone who might help. He lives on the Upper East Side. Take me to him, and I shall reward you."

Meg made a sound between a sneeze and a laugh. "Reward me with what?" She danced around, plucking twenty-dollar bills from the trash. "I'm already taking all your money."

"Hey!"

She tossed me my wallet, now empty except for Lester Papadopoulos's junior driver's license.

Meg sang, "I've got your money, I've got your money."

I stifled a growl. "Listen, child, I won't be mortal forever. Someday I will become a god again. Then I will reward those who helped me—and punish those who didn't."

She put her hands on her hips. “How do *you* know what will happen? Have you ever been mortal before?”

“Yes, actually. Twice! Both times, my punishment only lasted a few years at most!”

“Oh, yeah? And how did you get back to being all goddy or whatever?”

“*Goddy* is not a word,” I pointed out, though my poetic sensibilities were already thinking of ways I might use it. “Usually Zeus requires me to work as a slave for some important demigod. This fellow uptown I mentioned, for instance. He’d be perfect! I do whatever tasks my new master requires for a few years. As long as I behave, I am allowed back to Olympus. Right now I just have to recover my strength and figure out—”

“How do you know for sure which demigod?”

I blinked. “What?”

“Which demigod you’re supposed to serve, dummy.”

“I…uh. Well, it’s usually obvious. I just sort of run into them. That’s why I want to get to the Upper East Side. My new master will claim my service and—”

“I’m Meg McCaffrey!” Meg blew me a raspberry. “And I claim your service!”

Overhead, thunder rumbled in the gray sky. The sound echoed through the city canyons like divine laughter.

Whatever was left of my pride turned to ice water and trickled into my socks. “I walked right into that, didn’t I?”

“Yep!” Meg bounced up and down in her red sneakers. “We’re going to have fun!”

With great difficulty, I resisted the urge to weep. “Are you sure you’re not Artemis in disguise?”

“I’m that other thing,” Meg said, counting my money. “The thing you said before. A demigod.”

“How do you know?”

“Just do.” She gave me a smug smile. “And now I have a sidekick god named Lester!”

I raised my face to the heavens. “Please, Father, I get the point. Please, I can’t do this!”

Zeus did not answer. He was probably too busy recording my humiliation to share on Snapchat.

“Cheer up,” Meg told me. “Who’s that guy you wanted to see—the guy on the Upper East Side?”

“Another demigod,” I said. “He knows the way to a camp where I might find shelter, guidance, food—”

“Food?” Meg’s ears perked up almost as much as the points on her glasses. “*Good* food?”

“Well, normally I just eat ambrosia, but, yes, I suppose.”

“Then that’s my first order! We’re going to find this guy to take us to the camp place!”

I sighed miserably. It was going to be a very long servitude.

“As you wish,” I said. “Let’s find Percy Jackson.”

3

Used to be goddy
Now uptown feeling shoddy
Bah, haiku don't rhyme

AS WE TRUDGED up Madison Avenue, my mind swirled with questions: Why hadn't Zeus given me a winter coat? Why did Percy Jackson live so far uptown? Why did pedestrians keep staring at me?

I wondered if my divine radiance was starting to return. Perhaps the New Yorkers were awed by my obvious power and unearthly good looks.

Meg McCaffrey set me straight.

"You smell," she said. "You look like you've just been mugged."

"I *have* just been mugged. Also enslaved by a small child."

"It's not slavery." She chewed off a piece of her thumb cuticle and spit it out. "It's more like mutual cooperation."

"Mutual in the sense that you give orders and I am forced to cooperate?"

"Yep." She stopped in front of a storefront window. "See? You look gross."

My reflection stared back at me, except it was *not* my reflection. It couldn't be. The face was the same as on Lester Papadopoulos's ID.

I looked about sixteen. My medium-length hair was dark and curly—a style I had rocked in Athenian times, and again in the 1970s. My eyes were blue. My face was pleasing enough in a dorkish way, but it was marred by a swollen eggplant-colored nose, which had dripped a gruesome mustache of blood down my upper lip. Even worse, my cheeks were covered with some sort of rash that looked suspiciously like…My heart climbed into my throat.

"Horrors!" I cried. "Is that—Is that *acne*?"

Immortal gods do not *get* acne. It is one of our inalienable rights. Yet I leaned closer to the glass and saw that my skin was indeed a scarred landscape of whiteheads and pustules.

I balled my fists and wailed to the cruel sky, “Zeus, what have I done to deserve this?”

Meg tugged at my sleeve. “You’re going to get yourself arrested.”

“What does it matter? I have been made a teenager, and not even one with perfect skin! I bet I don’t even have…” With a cold sense of dread, I lifted my shirt. My midriff was covered with a floral pattern of bruises from my fall into the Dumpster and my subsequent kicking. But even worse, I had *flab.*

“Oh, no, no, no.” I staggered around the sidewalk, hoping the flab would not follow me. “Where are my eight-pack abs? I *always* have eight-pack abs. I *never* have love handles. Never in four thousand years!”

Meg made another snorting laugh. “Sheesh, crybaby, you’re fine.”

“I’m fat!”

“You’re average. Average people don’t have eight-pack abs. C’mon.”

I wanted to protest that I was not average *nor* a person, but with growing despair, I realized the term now fit me perfectly.

On the other side of the storefront window, a security guard’s face loomed, scowling at me. I allowed Meg to pull me farther down the street.

She skipped along, occasionally stopping to pick up a coin or swing herself around a streetlamp. The child seemed unfazed by the cold weather, the dangerous journey ahead, and the fact that I was suffering from acne.

“How are you so calm?” I demanded. “You are a demigod, walking with a god, on your way to a camp to meet others of your kind. Doesn’t any of that surprise you?”

“Eh.” She folded one of my twenty-dollar bills into a paper airplane. “I’ve seen a bunch of weird stuff.”

I was tempted to ask what could be weirder than the morning we had just had. I decided I might not be able to stand the stress of knowing. “Where are you from?”

“I told you. The alley.”

“No, but…your parents? Family? Friends?”

A ripple of discomfort passed over her face. She returned her attention to her twenty-dollar airplane. “Not important.”

My highly advanced people-reading skills told me she was hiding something, but that was not unusual for demigods. For children blessed with an immortal parent, they were strangely sensitive about their backgrounds. “And you’ve never heard of Camp Half-Blood? Or Camp Jupiter?”

“Nuh-uh.” She tested the airplane’s point on her fingertip. “How much farther to Perry’s house?”

“Percy’s. I’m not sure. A few more blocks…I think.”

That seemed to satisfy Meg. She hopscotched ahead, throwing the cash airplane and retrieving it. She cartwheeled through the intersection at East Seventy-Second Street—her clothes a flurry of traffic-light colors so bright I worried the drivers might get confused and run her down. Fortunately, New York drivers were used to swerving around oblivious pedestrians.

I decided Meg must be a feral demigod. They were rare but not unheard of. Without any support network, without being discovered by other demigods or taken in for proper training, she had still managed to survive. But her luck would not last. Monsters usually began hunting down and killing young heroes around the time they turned thirteen, when their true powers began to manifest. Meg did not have long. She needed to be brought to Camp Half-Blood as much as I did. She was fortunate to have met me.

(I know that last statement seems obvious. *Everyone* who meets me is fortunate, but you take my meaning.)

Had I been my usual omniscient self, I could have gleaned Meg's destiny. I could have looked into her soul and seen all I needed to know about her godly parentage, her powers, her motives and secrets.

Now I was blind to such things. I could only be sure she was a demigod because she had successfully claimed my service. Zeus had affirmed her right with a clap of thunder. I felt the binding upon me like a shroud of tightly wrapped banana peels. Whoever Meg McCaffrey was, however she had happened to find me, our fates were now intertwined.

It was almost as embarrassing as the acne.

We turned east on Eighty-Second Street.

By the time we reached Second Avenue, the neighborhood started to look familiar—rows of apartment buildings, hardware shops, convenience stores, and Indian restaurants. I knew that Percy Jackson lived around here somewhere, but my trips across the sky in the sun chariot had given me something of a Google Earth orientation. I wasn't used to traveling at street level.

Also, in this mortal form, my flawless memory had become…flawed. Mortal fears and needs clouded my thoughts. I wanted to eat. I wanted to use the restroom. My body hurt. My clothes stank. I felt as if my brain had been stuffed with wet cotton. Honestly, how do you humans stand it?

After a few more blocks, a mixture of sleet and rain began to fall. Meg tried to catch the precipitation on her tongue, which I thought a very ineffective way to get a drink—and of dirty water, no less. I shivered and concentrated on happy thoughts: the Bahamas, the Nine Muses in perfect harmony, the many horrible punishments I would visit on Cade and Mikey when I became a god again.

I still wondered about their boss, and how he had known where I would fall

to earth. No mortal could've had that knowledge. In fact, the more I thought about it, I didn't see how even a god (other than myself) could have foreseen the future so accurately. After all, I had been the god of prophecy, master of the Oracle of Delphi, distributor of the highest quality sneak previews of destiny for millennia.

Of course, I had no shortage of enemies. One of the natural consequences of being so awesome is that I attracted envy from all quarters. But I could only think of one adversary who might be able to tell the future. And if *he* came looking for me in my weakened state…

I tamped down that thought. I had enough to worry about. No point scaring myself to death with what-ifs.

We began searching side streets, checking names on apartment mailboxes and intercom panels. The Upper East Side had a surprising number of Jacksons. I found that annoying.

After several failed attempts, we turned a corner and there—parked under a crape myrtle—sat an older model blue Prius. Its hood bore the unmistakable dents of pegasus hooves. (How was I sure? I know my hoof marks. Also, normal horses do not gallop over Toyotas. Pegasi often do.)

"Aha," I told Meg. "We're getting close."

Half a block down, I recognized the building: a five-story brick row house with rusty air conditioner units sagging from the windows. *"Voilà!"* I cried.

At the front steps, Meg stopped as if she'd run into an invisible barrier. She stared back toward Second Avenue, her dark eyes turbulent.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Thought I saw them again."

"Them?" I followed her gaze but saw nothing unusual. "The thugs from the alley?"

"No. Couple of…" She waggled her fingers. "Shiny blobs. Saw them back on Park Avenue."

My pulse increased from an andante tempo to a lively allegretto. "Shiny blobs? Why didn't you say anything?"

She tapped the temples of her glasses. "I've seen a lot of weird stuff. Told you that. Mostly, things don't bother me, but…"

"But if they are following us," I said, "that would be bad."

I scanned the street again. I saw nothing amiss, but I didn't doubt Meg had seen shiny blobs. Many spirits could appear that way. My own father, Zeus, once took the form of a shiny blob to woo a mortal woman. (Why the mortal woman found that attractive, I have no idea.)

"We should get inside," I said. "Percy Jackson will help us."

Still, Meg held back. She had shown no fear while pelting muggers with garbage in a blind alley, but now she seemed to be having second thoughts about ringing a doorbell. It occurred to me she might have met demigods before. Perhaps those meetings had not gone well.

"Meg," I said, "I realize some demigods are not good. I could tell you stories of all the ones I've had to kill or transform into herbs—"

"Herbs?"

"But Percy Jackson has always been reliable. You have nothing to fear. Besides, he likes me. I taught him everything he knows."

She frowned. "You did?"

I found her innocence somewhat charming. So many obvious things she did not know. "Of course. Now let's go up."

I rang the buzzer. A few moments later, the garbled voice of a woman answered, "Yes?"

"Hello," I said. "This is Apollo."

Static.

"The *god* Apollo," I said, thinking perhaps I should be more specific. "Is Percy home?"

More static, followed by two voices in muted conversation. The front door buzzed. I pushed it open. Just before I stepped inside, I caught a flash of movement in the corner of my eye. I peered down the sidewalk but again saw nothing.

Perhaps it had been a reflection. Or a whirl of sleet. Or perhaps it had been a shiny blob. My scalp tingled with apprehension.

"What?" Meg asked.

"Probably nothing." I forced a cheerful tone. I did not want Meg bolting off when we were so close to reaching safety. We were bound together now. I would have to follow her if she ordered me to, and I did not fancy living in the alley with her forever. "Let's go up. We can't keep our hosts waiting."

After all I had done for Percy Jackson, I expected delight upon my arrival. A tearful welcome, a few burnt offerings, and a small festival in my honor would not have been inappropriate.

Instead, the young man swung open the apartment door and said, "Why?"

As usual, I was struck by his resemblance to his father, Poseidon. He had the same sea-green eyes, the same dark tousled hair, the same handsome features that could shift from humor to anger so easily. However, Percy Jackson did not favor his father's chosen garb of beach shorts and Hawaiian shirts. He was

dressed in ragged jeans and a blue hoodie with the words AHS SWIM TEAM stitched across the front.

Meg inched back into the hallway, hiding behind me.

I tried for a smile. “Percy Jackson, my blessings upon you! I am in need of assistance.”

Percy’s eyes darted from me to Meg. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Meg McCaffrey,” I said, “a demigod who must be taken to Camp Half-Blood. She rescued me from street thugs.”

“Rescued…” Percy scanned my battered face. “You mean the ‘beat-up teenager’ look isn’t just a disguise? Dude, what happened to you?”

“I may have mentioned the street thugs.”

“But you’re a god.”

“About that…I *was* a god.”

Percy blinked. *“Was?”*

“Also,” I said, “I’m fairly certain we’re being followed by malicious spirits.”

If I didn’t know how much Percy Jackson adored me, I would have sworn he was about to punch me in my already-broken nose.

He sighed. “Maybe you two should come inside.”

4

Casa de Jackson
No gold-plated throne for guests
Seriously, dude?

ANOTHER THING I have never understood: How can you mortals live in such tiny places? Where is your pride? Your sense of style?

The Jackson apartment had no grand throne room, no colonnades, no terraces or banquet halls or even a thermal bath. It had a tiny living room with an attached kitchen and a single hallway leading to what I assumed were the bedrooms. The place was on the fifth floor, and while I wasn't so picky as to expect an elevator, I did find it odd there was no landing deck for flying chariots. What did they do when guests from the sky wanted to visit?

Standing behind the kitchen counter, making a smoothie, was a strikingly attractive mortal woman of about forty. Her long brown hair had a few gray streaks, but her bright eyes, quick smile, and festive tie-dyed sundress made her look younger.

As we entered, she turned off the blender and stepped out from behind the counter.

"Sacred Sibyl!" I cried. "Madam, there is something wrong with your midsection!"

The woman stopped, mystified, and looked down at her hugely swollen belly. "Well, I'm seven months pregnant."

I wanted to cry for her. Carrying such a weight didn't seem natural. My sister, Artemis, had experience with midwifery, but I had always found it one area of the healing arts best left to others. "How can you bear it?" I asked. "My mother, Leto, suffered through a long pregnancy, but only because Hera cursed her. Are you cursed?"

Percy stepped to my side. "Um, Apollo? She's not cursed. And can you not

mention Hera?"

"You poor woman." I shook my head. "A goddess would never allow herself to be so encumbered. She would give birth as soon as she felt like it."

"That must be nice," the woman agreed.

Percy Jackson coughed. "So anyway. Mom, this is Apollo and his friend Meg. Guys, this is my mom."

The Mother of Jackson smiled and shook our hands. "Call me Sally."

Her eyes narrowed as she studied my busted nose. "Dear, that looks painful. What happened?"

I attempted to explain, but I choked on my words. I, the silver-tongued god of poetry, could not bring myself to describe my fall from grace to this kind woman.

I understood why Poseidon had been so smitten with her. Sally Jackson possessed just the right combination of compassion, strength, and beauty. She was one of those rare mortal women who could connect spiritually with a god as an equal—to be neither terrified of us nor greedy for what we can offer, but to provide us with true companionship.

If I had still been an immortal, I might have flirted with her myself. But I was now a sixteen-year-old boy. My mortal form was working its way upon my state of mind. I saw Sally Jackson as a mom—a fact that both consternated and embarrassed me. I thought about how long it had been since I had called my own mother. I should probably take her to lunch when I got back to Olympus.

"I tell you what." Sally patted my shoulder. "Percy can help you get bandaged and cleaned up."

"I can?" asked Percy.

Sally gave him the slightest motherly eyebrow raise. "There's a first-aid kit in your bathroom, sweetheart. Apollo can take a shower, then wear your extra clothes. You two are about the same size."

"That," Percy said, "is truly depressing."

Sally cupped her hand under Meg's chin. Thankfully, Meg did not bite her. Sally's expression remained gentle and reassuring, but I could see the worry in her eyes. No doubt she was thinking, *Who dressed this poor girl like a traffic light?*

"I have some clothes that might fit you, dear," Sally said. "Pre-pregnancy clothes, of course. Let's get you cleaned up. Then we'll get you something to eat."

"I like food," Meg muttered.

Sally laughed. "Well, we have that in common. Percy, you take Apollo. We'll meet you back here in a while."

In short order, I was showered, bandaged, and dressed in Jacksonesque hand-me-downs. Percy left me alone in the bathroom to take care of all this myself, for which I was grateful. He offered me some ambrosia and nectar—food and drink of the gods—to heal my wounds, but I was not sure it would be safe to consume in my mortal state. I didn't want to self-combust, so I stuck with mortal first-aid supplies.

When I was done, I stared at my battered face in the bathroom mirror. Perhaps teenage angst had permeated the clothes, because I felt more like a sulky high schooler than ever. I thought how unfair it was that I was being punished, how lame my father was, how no one else in the history of time had ever experienced problems like mine.

Of course, all that was empirically true. No exaggeration was required.

At least my wounds seemed to be healing at a faster rate than a normal mortal's. The swelling in my nose had subsided. My ribs still ached, but I no longer felt as if someone were knitting a sweater inside my chest with hot needles.

Accelerated healing was the *least* Zeus could do for me. I was a god of medicinal arts, after all. Zeus probably just wanted me to get well quickly so I could endure more pain, but I was grateful nonetheless.

I wondered if I should start a small fire in Percy Jackson's sink, perhaps burn some bandages in thanks, but I decided that might strain the Jacksons' hospitality.

I examined the black T-shirt Percy had given me. Emblazoned on the front was Led Zeppelin's logo for their record label: winged Icarus falling from the sky. I had no problem with Led Zeppelin. I had inspired all their best songs. But I had a sneaking suspicion that Percy had given me this shirt as a joke—the fall from the sky. Yes, ha-ha. I didn't need to be a god of poetry to spot the metaphor. I decided not to comment on it. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I took a deep breath. Then I did my usual motivational speech in the mirror: "You are gorgeous and people love you!"

I went out to face the world.

Percy was sitting on his bed, staring at the trail of blood droplets I had made across his carpet.

"Sorry about that," I said.

Percy spread his hands. "Actually, I was thinking about the last time I had a nosebleed."

"Oh…"

The memory came back to me, though hazy and incomplete. Athens. The Acropolis. We gods had battled side by side with Percy Jackson and his

comrades. We defeated an army of giants, but a drop of Percy's blood hit the earth and awakened the Earth Mother Gaea, who had not been in a good mood.

That's when Zeus turned on me. He'd accused me of starting the whole thing, just because Gaea had duped one of my progeny, a boy named Octavian, into plunging the Roman and Greek demigod camps into a civil war that almost destroyed human civilization. I ask you: How was that my fault?

Regardless, Zeus had held *me* responsible for Octavian's delusions of grandeur. Zeus seemed to consider egotism a trait the boy had inherited from me. Which is ridiculous. I am much too self-aware to be egotistical.

"What happened to you, man?" Percy's voice stirred me from my reverie. "The war ended in August. It's January."

"It is?" I suppose the wintry weather should have been a clue, but I hadn't given it much thought.

"Last I saw you," Percy said, "Zeus was chewing you out at the Acropolis. Then *bam*—he vaporized you. Nobody's seen or heard from you for six months."

I tried to recall, but my memories of godhood were getting fuzzier rather than clearer. What had happened in the last six months? Had I been in some kind of stasis? Had Zeus taken that long to decide what to do with me? Perhaps there was a reason he'd waited until this moment to hurl me to earth.

Father's voice still rang in my ears: *Your fault. Your punishment.* My shame felt fresh and raw, as if the conversation had just happened, but I could not be sure.

After being alive for so many millennia, I had trouble keeping track of time even in the best of circumstances. I would hear a song on Spotify and think, "Oh, that's new!" Then I'd realize it was Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 20 in D Minor from two hundred years ago. Or I'd wonder why Herodotus the historian wasn't in my contacts list. Then I'd remember Herodotus didn't have a smartphone, because he had been dead since the Iron Age.

It's very irritating how quickly you mortals die.

"I—I don't know where I've been," I admitted. "I have some memory gaps."

Percy winced. "I hate memory gaps. Last year I lost an entire semester thanks to Hera."

"Ah, yes." I couldn't quite remember what Percy Jackson was talking about. During the war with Gaea, I had been focused mostly on my own fabulous exploits. But I suppose he and his friends had undergone a few minor hardships.

"Well, never fear," I said. "There are always new opportunities to win fame! That's why I've come to you for help!"

He gave me that confusing expression again: as if he wanted to kick me,

when I was sure he must be struggling to contain his gratitude.

"Look, man—"

"Would you please refrain from calling me *man*?" I asked. "It is a painful reminder that I am a man."

"Okay…Apollo, I'm fine with driving you and Meg to camp if that's what you want. I never turn away a demigod who needs help—"

"Wonderful! Do you have something besides the Prius? A Maserati, perhaps? I'd settle for a Lamborghini."

"But," Percy continued, "I can't get involved in another Big Prophecy or whatever. I've made promises."

I stared at him, not quite comprehending. "Promises?"

Percy laced his fingers. They were long and nimble. He would have made an excellent musician. "I lost most of my junior year because of the war with Gaea. I've spent this entire fall playing catch-up with my classes. If I want to go to college with Annabeth next fall, I have to stay out of trouble and get my diploma."

"Annabeth." I tried to place the name. "She's the blond scary one?"

"That's her. I promised her *specifically* that I wouldn't get myself killed while she's gone."

"Gone?"

Percy waved vaguely toward the north. "She's in Boston for a few weeks. Some family emergency. The point is—"

"You're saying you cannot offer me your undivided service to restore me to my throne?"

"Um…yeah." He pointed at the bedroom doorway. "Besides, my mom's pregnant. I'm going to have a baby sister. I'd like to be around to get to know her."

"Well, I understand that. I remember when Artemis was born—"

"Aren't you twins?"

"I've always regarded her as my little sister."

Percy's mouth twitched. "Anyway, my mom's got that going on, and her first novel is going to be published this spring as well, so I'd like to stay alive long enough to—"

"Wonderful!" I said. "Remind her to burn the proper sacrifices. Calliope is quite touchy when novelists forget to thank her."

"Okay. But what I'm saying…I can't go off on another world-stomping quest. I can't do that to my family."

Percy glanced toward his window. On the sill was a potted plant with delicate silver leaves—possibly moonlace. "I've already given my mom enough

heart attacks for one lifetime. She's just about forgiven me for disappearing last year, but I swore to her and Paul that I wouldn't do anything like that again."

"Paul?"

"My stepdad. He's at a teacher in-service today. He's a good guy."

"I see." In truth, I didn't see. I wanted to get back to talking about my problems. I was impatient with Percy for turning the conversation to himself. Sadly, I have found this sort of self-centeredness common among demigods.

"You *do* understand that I must find a way to return to Olympus," I said. "This will probably involve many harrowing trials with a high chance of death. Can you turn down such glory?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can. Sorry."

I pursed my lips. It always disappointed me when mortals put themselves first and failed to see the big picture—the importance of putting *me* first—but I had to remind myself that this young man had helped me out on many previous occasions. He had earned my goodwill.

"I understand," I said with incredible generosity. "You will at least escort us to Camp Half-Blood?"

"That I can do." Percy reached into his hoodie pocket and pulled out a ballpoint pen. For a moment I thought he wanted my autograph. I can't tell you how often that happens. Then I remembered the pen was the disguised form of his sword, Riptide.

He smiled, and some of that old demigod mischief twinkled in his eyes. "Let's see if Meg's ready for a field trip."

5

Seven-layer dip
Chocolate chip cookies in blue
I love this woman

SALLY JACKSON was a witch to rival Circe. She had transformed Meg from a street urchin into a shockingly pretty young girl. Meg's dark pageboy hair was glossy and brushed. Her round face was scrubbed clean of grime. Her cat-eye glasses had been polished so the rhinestones sparkled. She had evidently insisted on keeping her old red sneakers, but she wore new black leggings and a knee-length frock of shifting green hues.

Mrs. Jackson had figured out how to keep Meg's old look but tweak it to be more complementary. Meg now had an elfish springtime aura that reminded me very much of a dryad. In fact…

A sudden wave of emotion overwhelmed me. I choked back a sob.

Meg pouted. "Do I look that bad?"

"No, no," I managed. "It's just…"

I wanted to say: *You remind me of someone.* But I didn't dare open that line of conversation. Only two mortals *ever* had broken my heart. Even after so many centuries, I couldn't think of her, couldn't say her name without falling into despair.

Don't misunderstand me. I felt no attraction to Meg. I was sixteen (or four thousand plus, depending on how you looked at it). She was a very young twelve. But the way she appeared now, Meg McCaffrey might have been the daughter of my former love…if my former love had lived long enough to have children.

It was too painful. I looked away.

"Well," Sally Jackson said with forced cheerfulness, "how about I make some lunch while you three…talk."

She gave Percy a worried glance, then headed to the kitchen, her hands protectively over her pregnant belly.

Meg sat on the edge of the sofa. “Percy, your mom is so normal.”

“Thanks, I guess.” He picked up a stack of test preparation manuals from the coffee table and chucked them aside.

“I see you like to study,” I said. “Well done.”

Percy snorted. “I *hate* to study. I’ve been guaranteed admission with a full scholarship to New Rome University, but they’re still requiring me to pass all my high school courses and score well on the SAT. Can you believe that? Not to mention I have to pass the DSTOMP.”

“The what?” Meg asked.

“An exam for Roman demigods,” I told her. “The Demigod Standard Test of Mad Powers.”

Percy frowned. “That’s what it stands for?”

“I should know. I wrote the music and poetry analysis sections.”

“I will never forgive you for that,” Percy said.

Meg swung her feet. “So you’re really a demigod? Like me?”

“Afraid so.” Percy sank into the armchair, leaving me to take the sofa next to Meg. “My dad is the godly one—Poseidon. What about your parents?”

Meg’s legs went still. She studied her chewed cuticles, the matching crescent rings glinting on her middle fingers. “Never knew them…much.”

Percy hesitated. “Foster home? Stepparents?”

I thought of a certain plant, the *Mimosa pudica*, which the god Pan created. As soon as its leaves are touched, the plant closes up defensively. Meg seemed to be playing mimosa, folding inward under Percy’s questions.

Percy raised his hands. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.” He gave me an inquisitive look. “So how did you guys meet?”

I told him the story. I may have exaggerated my brave defense against Cade and Mikey—just for narrative effect, you understand.

As I finished, Sally Jackson returned. She set down a bowl of tortilla chips and a casserole dish filled with elaborate dip in multicolored strata, like sedimentary rock.

“I’ll be back with the sandwiches,” she said. “But I had some leftover seven-layer dip.”

“Yum.” Percy dug in with a tortilla chip. “She’s kinda famous for this, guys.”

Sally ruffled his hair. “There’s guacamole, sour cream, refried beans, salsa __”

“Seven layers?” I looked up in wonder. “You knew seven is my sacred number? You invented this for *me*?”

Sally wiped her hands on her apron. “Well, actually, I can’t take credit—”

“You are too modest!” I tried some of the dip. It tasted almost as good as ambrosia nachos. “You will have immortal fame for this, Sally Jackson!”

“That’s sweet.” She pointed to the kitchen. “I’ll be right back.”

Soon we were plowing through turkey sandwiches, chips and dip, and banana smoothies. Meg ate like a chipmunk, shoving more food in her mouth than she could possibly chew. My belly was full. I had never been so happy. I had a strange desire to fire up an Xbox and play *Call of Duty.*

“Percy,” I said, “your mom is awesome.”

“I know, right?” He finished his smoothie. “So back to your story…you have to be Meg’s servant now? You guys barely know each other.”

“*Barely* is generous,” I said. “Nevertheless, yes. My fate is now linked with young McCaffrey.”

“We are *cooperating*,” Meg said. She seemed to savor that word.

From his pocket, Percy fished his ballpoint pen. He tapped it thoughtfully against his knee. “And this whole turning-into-a-mortal thing…you’ve done it twice before?”

“Not by choice,” I assured him. “The first time, we had a little rebellion in Olympus. We tried to overthrow Zeus.”

Percy winced. “I’m guessing that didn’t go well.”

“I got most of the blame, naturally. Oh, and your father, Poseidon. We were both cast down to earth as mortals, forced to serve Laomedon, the king of Troy. He was a harsh master. He even refused to pay us for our work!”

Meg nearly choked on her sandwich. “I have to pay you?”

I had a terrifying image of Meg McCaffrey trying to pay me in bottle caps, marbles, and pieces of colored string.

“Never fear,” I told her. “I won’t be presenting you with a bill. But as I was saying, the second time I became mortal, Zeus got mad because I killed some of his Cyclopes.”

Percy frowned. “Dude, not cool. My brother is a Cyclops.”

“These were wicked Cyclopes! They made the lightning bolt that killed one of my sons!”

Meg bounced on the arm of the sofa. “Percy’s brother is a Cyclops? That’s crazy!”

I took a deep breath, trying to find my happy place. “At any rate, I was bound to Admetus, the king of Thessaly. He was a kind master. I liked him so much, I made all his cows have twin calves.”

“Can I have baby cows?” Meg asked.

“Well, Meg,” I said, “first you would have to have some mommy cows. You

see—”

“Guys,” Percy interrupted. “So, just to recap, you have to be Meg’s servant for…?”

“Some unknown amount of time,” I said. “Probably a year. Possibly more.”

“And during that time—”

“I will undoubtedly face many trials and hardships.”

“Like getting me my cows,” Meg said.

I gritted my teeth. “What those trials will be, I do not yet know. But if I suffer through them and prove I am worthy, Zeus will forgive me and allow me to become a god again.”

Percy did not look convinced—probably because I did not sound convincing. I *had* to believe my mortal punishment was temporary, as it had been the last two times. Yet Zeus had created a strict rule for baseball and prison sentences: *Three strikes, you’re out.* I could only hope this would not apply to me.

“I need time to get my bearings,” I said. “Once we get to Camp Half-Blood, I can consult with Chiron. I can figure out which of my godly powers remain with me in this mortal form.”

“If any,” Percy said.

“Let’s think positive.”

Percy sat back in his armchair. “Any idea what kind of spirits are following you?”

“Shiny blobs,” Meg said. “They were shiny and sort of…blobby.”

Percy nodded gravely. “Those are the worst kind.”

“It hardly matters,” I said. “Whatever they are, we have to flee. Once we reach camp, the magical borders will protect me.”

“And me?” Meg asked.

“Oh, yes. You, too.”

Percy frowned. “Apollo, if you’re really mortal, like, one hundred percent mortal, can you even get *in* to Camp Half-Blood?”

The seven-layer dip began to churn in my stomach. “Please don’t say that. Of course I’ll get in. I *have* to.”

“But you could get hurt in battle now…” Percy mused. “Then again, maybe monsters would ignore you because you’re not important?”

“Stop!” My hands trembled. Being a mortal was traumatic enough. The thought of being barred from camp, of being *unimportant*…No. That simply could not be.

“I’m sure I’ve retained some powers,” I said. “I’m still gorgeous, for instance, if I could just get rid of this acne and lose some flab. I must have other abilities!”

Percy turned to Meg. “What about you? I hear you throw a mean garbage bag. Any other skills we should know about? Summoning lightning? Making toilets explode?”

Meg smiled hesitantly. “That’s not a power.”

“Sure it is,” Percy said. “Some of the best demigods have gotten their start by blowing up toilets.”

Meg giggled.

I did not like the way she was grinning at Percy. I didn’t want the girl to develop a crush. We might never get out of here. As much as I enjoyed Sally Jackson’s cooking—the divine smell of baking cookies was even now wafting from the kitchen—I needed to make haste to camp.

“Ahem.” I rubbed my hands. “How soon can we leave?”

Percy glanced at the wall clock. “Right now, I guess. If you’re being followed, I’d rather have monsters on our trail than sniffing around the apartment.”

“Good man,” I said.

Percy gestured with distaste at his test manuals. “I just have to be back tonight. Got a lot of studying. The first two times I took the SAT—ugh. If it wasn’t for Annabeth helping me out—”

“Who’s that?” Meg asked.

“My girlfriend.”

Meg frowned. I was glad there were no garbage bags nearby for her to throw.

“So take a break!” I urged. “Your brain will be refreshed after an easy drive to Long Island.”

“Huh,” Percy said. “There’s a lazy kind of logic to that. Okay. Let’s do it.”

He rose just as Sally Jackson walked in with a plate of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. For some reason, the cookies were blue, but they smelled heavenly—and I should know. I’m from heaven.

“Mom, don’t freak,” Percy said.

Sally sighed. “I hate it when you say that.”

“I’m just going to take these two to camp. That’s all. I’ll be right back.”

“I think I’ve heard that before.”

“I *promise*.”

Sally looked at me, then Meg. Her expression softened, her innate kindness perhaps overweighing her concern. “All right. Be careful. It was lovely meeting you both. Please try not to die.”

Percy kissed her on the cheek. He reached for the cookies, but she moved the plate away.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Apollo and Meg can have one, but I’m keeping the rest

hostage until you're back safely. And hurry, dear. It would be a shame if Paul ate them all when he gets home."

Percy's expression turned grim. He faced us. "You hear that, guys? A batch of cookies is depending on me. If you get me killed on the way to camp, I am going be ticked off."

6

Aquaman driving
Couldn't possibly be worse
Oh, wait, now it is

MUCH TO MY DISAPPOINTMENT, the Jacksons did not have a spare bow or quiver to lend me.

"I suck at archery," Percy explained.

"Yes, but *I* don't," I said. "This is why you should always plan for *my* needs."

Sally lent Meg and me some proper winter fleece jackets, however. Mine was blue, with the word BLOFIS written inside the neckline. Perhaps that was an arcane ward against evil spirits. Hecate would have known. Sorcery really wasn't my thing.

Once we reached the Prius, Meg called shotgun, which was yet another example of my unfair existence. Gods do not ride in the back. I again suggested following them in a Maserati or a Lamborghini, but Percy admitted he had neither. The Prius was the only car his family owned.

I mean…wow. Just *wow*.

Sitting in the backseat, I quickly became carsick. I was used to driving my sun chariot across the sky, where every lane was the fast lane. I was not used to the Long Island Expressway. Believe me, even at midday in the middle of January, there is nothing *express* about your expressways.

Percy braked and lurched forward. I sorely wished I could launch a fireball in front of us and melt cars to make way for our clearly more important journey.

"Doesn't your Prius have flamethrowers?" I demanded. "Lasers? At least some Hephaestian bumper blades? What sort of cheap economy vehicle is this?"

Percy glanced in the rearview mirror. "You have rides like that on Mount Olympus?"

“We don’t have traffic jams,” I said. “That, I can promise you.”

Meg tugged at her crescent moon rings. Again I wondered if she had some connection to Artemis. The moon was my sister’s symbol. Perhaps Artemis had sent Meg to look after me?

Yet that didn’t seem right. Artemis had trouble sharing anything with me—demigods, arrows, nations, birthday parties. It’s a twin thing. Also, Meg McCaffrey did not strike me as one of my sister’s followers. Meg had another sort of aura…one I would have been able to recognize easily if I were a god. But, no. I had to rely on mortal intuition, which was like trying to pick up sewing needles while wearing oven mitts.

Meg turned and gazed out the rear windshield, probably checking for any shiny blobs pursuing us. “At least we’re not being—”

“Don’t say it,” Percy warned.

Meg huffed. “You don’t know what I was going to—”

“You were going to say, ‘At least we’re not being followed,’” Percy said. “That’ll jinx us. Immediately we’ll notice that we *are* being followed. Then we’ll end up in a big battle that totals my family car and probably destroys the whole freeway. Then we’ll have to run all the way to camp.”

Meg’s eyes widened. “You can tell the future?”

“Don’t need to.” Percy changed lanes to one that was crawling slightly less slowly. “I’ve just done this a lot. Besides”—he shot me an accusing look—“nobody can tell the future anymore. The Oracle isn’t working.”

“What Oracle?” Meg asked.

Neither of us answered. For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. And believe me, I have to be *very* stunned for that to happen.

“It *still* isn’t working?” I said in a small voice.

“You didn’t know?” Percy asked. “I mean, sure, you’ve been out of it for six months, but this happened on your watch.”

That was unjust. I had been busy hiding from Zeus’s wrath at the time, which was a perfectly legitimate excuse. How was I to know that Gaea would take advantage of the chaos of war and raise my oldest, greatest enemy from the depths of Tartarus so he could take possession of his old lair in the cave of Delphi and cut off the source of my prophetic power?

Oh, yes, I hear you critics out there: *You’re the god of prophecy, Apollo. How could you* not *know that would happen?*

The next sound you hear will be me blowing you a giant Meg-McCaffrey-quality raspberry.

I swallowed back the taste of fear and seven-layer dip. “I just…I assumed—I hoped this would be taken care of by now.”

“You mean by demigods,” Percy said, “going on a big quest to reclaim the Oracle of Delphi?”

“Exactly!” I knew Percy would understand. “I suppose Chiron just forgot. I’ll remind him when we get to camp, and he can dispatch some of you talented fodder—I mean heroes—”

“Well, here’s the thing,” Percy said. “To go on a quest, we need a prophecy, right? Those are the rules. If there’s no Oracle, there *are* no prophecies, so we’re stuck in a—”

“A Catch-88.” I sighed.

Meg threw a piece of lint at me. “It’s a Catch-22.”

“No,” I explained patiently. “This is a Catch-88, which is four times as bad.”

I felt as if I were floating in a warm bath and someone had pulled out the stopper. The water swirled around me, tugging me downward. Soon I would be left shivering and exposed, or else I would be sucked down the drain into the sewers of hopelessness. (Don’t laugh. That’s a perfectly fine metaphor. Also, when you’re a god, you can get sucked down a drain quite easily—if you’re caught off guard and relaxed, and you happen to change form at the wrong moment. Once I woke up in a sewage treatment facility in Biloxi, but that’s another story.)

I was beginning to see what was in store for me during my mortal sojourn. The Oracle was held by hostile forces. My adversary lay coiled and waiting, growing stronger every day on the magical fumes of the Delphic caverns. And I was a weak mortal bound to an untrained demigod who threw garbage and chewed her cuticles.

No. Zeus could not *possibly* expect me to fix this. Not in my present condition.

And yet…*someone* had sent those thugs to intercept me in the alley. Someone had known where I would land.

Nobody can tell the future anymore, Percy had said.

But that wasn’t quite true.

“Hey, you two.” Meg hit us both with pieces of lint. Where was she finding this lint?

I realized I’d been ignoring her. It had felt good while it lasted.

“Yes, sorry, Meg,” I said. “You see, the Oracle of Delphi is an ancient—”

“I don’t care about that,” she said. “There are three shiny blobs now.”

“What?” Percy asked.

She pointed behind us. “Look.”

Weaving through the traffic, closing in on us rapidly, were three glittery, vaguely humanoid apparitions—like billowing plumes from smoke grenades

touched by King Midas.

"Just once I'd like an easy commute," Percy grumbled. "Everybody, hold on. We're going cross-country."

Percy's definition of *cross-country* was different from mine.

I envisioned crossing an actual countryside. Instead, Percy shot down the nearest exit ramp, wove across the parking lot of a shopping mall, then blasted through the drive-through of a Mexican restaurant without even ordering anything. We swerved into an industrial area of dilapidated warehouses, the smoking apparitions still closing in behind us.

My knuckles turned white on my seat belt's shoulder strap. "Is your plan to avoid a fight by dying in a traffic accident?" I demanded.

"Ha-ha." Percy yanked the wheel to the right. We sped north, the warehouses giving way to a hodgepodge of apartment buildings and abandoned strip malls. "I'm getting us to the beach. I fight better near water."

"Because Poseidon?" Meg asked, steadying herself against the door handle.

"Yep," Percy agreed. "That pretty much describes my entire life: *Because Poseidon.*"

Meg bounced up and down with excitement, which seemed pointless to me, since we were already bouncing quite a lot.

"You're gonna be like Aquaman?" she asked. "Get the fish to fight for you?"

"Thanks," Percy said. "I haven't heard enough Aquaman jokes for one lifetime."

"I wasn't joking!" Meg protested.

I glanced out the rear window. The three glittering plumes were still gaining. One of them passed through a middle-aged man crossing the street. The mortal pedestrian instantly collapsed.

"Ah, I know these spirits!" I cried. "They are…um…"

My brain clouded over.

"What?" Percy demanded. "They are what?"

"I've forgotten! I *hate* being mortal! Four thousand years of knowledge, the secrets of the universe, a sea of wisdom—lost, because I can't contain it all in this teacup of a head!"

"Hold on!" Percy flew through a railroad crossing and the Prius went airborne. Meg yelped as her head hit the ceiling. Then she began giggling uncontrollably.

The landscape opened into actual countryside—fallow fields, dormant vineyards, orchards of bare fruit trees.

“Just another mile or so to the beach,” Percy said. “Plus we’re almost to the western edge of camp. We can do it. We can do it.”

Actually, we couldn’t. One of the shiny smoke clouds pulled a dirty trick, pluming from the pavement directly in front of us.

Instinctively, Percy swerved.

The Prius went off the road, straight through a barbed wire fence and into an orchard. Percy managed to avoid hitting any of the trees, but the car skidded in the icy mud and wedged itself between two trunks. Miraculously, the air bags did not deploy.

Percy popped his seat belt. “You guys okay?”

Meg shoved against her passenger-side door. “Won’t open. Get me out of here!”

Percy tried his own door. It was firmly jammed against the side of a peach tree.

“Back here,” I said. “Climb over!”

I kicked my door open and staggered out, my legs feeling like worn shock absorbers.

The three smoky figures had stopped at the edge of the orchard. Now they advanced slowly, taking on solid shapes. They grew arms and legs. Their faces formed eyes and wide, hungry mouths.

I knew instinctively that I had dealt with these spirits before. I couldn’t remember what they were, but I had dispelled them many times, swatting them into oblivion with no more effort than I would a swarm of gnats.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t a god now. I was a panicky sixteen-year-old. My palms sweated. My teeth chattered. My only coherent thought was: *YIKES!*

Percy and Meg struggled to get out of the Prius. They needed time, which meant I had to run interference.

“STOP!” I bellowed at the spirits. “I am the god Apollo!”

To my pleasant surprise, the three spirits stopped. They hovered in place about forty feet away.

I heard Meg grunt as she tumbled out of the backseat. Percy scrambled after her.

I advanced toward the spirits, the frosty mud crunching under my shoes. My breath steamed in the cold air. I raised my hand in an ancient three-fingered gesture for warding off evil.

“Leave us or be destroyed!” I told the spirits. “BLOFIS!”

The smoky shapes trembled. My hopes lifted. I waited for them to dissipate or flee in terror.

Instead, they solidified into ghoulish corpses with yellow eyes. Their clothes

were tattered rags, their limbs covered with gaping wounds and running sores.

"Oh, dear." My Adam's apple dropped into my chest like a billiard ball. "I remember now."

Percy and Meg stepped to either side of me. With a metallic *shink*, Percy's pen grew into a blade of glowing Celestial bronze.

"Remember what?" he asked. "How to kill these things?"

"No," I said. "I remember what they are: *nosoi*, plague spirits. Also…they can't be killed."

7

Tag with plague spirits
You're it, and you're infectious
Have fun with that, LOL

"NOSOI?" **PERCY PLANTED HIS FEET** in a fighting stance. "You know, I keep thinking, *I have now killed every single thing in Greek mythology.* But the list never seems to end."

"You haven't killed me yet," I noted.

"Don't tempt me."

The three nosoi shuffled forward. Their cadaverous mouths gaped. Their tongues lolled. Their eyes glistened with a film of yellow mucus.

"These creatures are *not* myths," I said. "Of course, most things in those old myths are not myths. Except for that story about how I flayed the satyr Marsyas alive. That was a total lie."

Percy glanced at me. "You did *what*?"

"Guys." Meg picked up a dead tree branch. "Could we talk about that later?"

The middle plague spirit spoke. "Apollooooo…" His voice gurgled like a seal with bronchitis. "We have coooome to—"

"Let me stop you right there." I crossed my arms and feigned arrogant indifference. (Difficult for me, but I managed.) "You've come to take your revenge on me, eh?" I looked at my demigod friends. "You see, nosoi are the spirits of disease. Once *I* was born, spreading illnesses became part of *my* job. I use plague arrows to strike down naughty populations with smallpox, athlete's foot, that sort of thing."

"Gross," Meg said.

"Somebody's got to do it!" I said. "Better a god, regulated by the Council of Olympus and with the proper health permits, than a horde of uncontrolled spirits like *these*."

The spirit on the left gurgled. “We’re trying to have a mooooment here. Stop interrupting! We wish to be free, uncontroooolled—”

“Yes, I know. You’ll destroy me. Then you’ll spread every known malady across the world. You’ve been wanting to do that ever since Pandora let you out of that jar. But you can’t. I will strike you down!”

Perhaps you are wondering how I could act so confident and calm. In fact, I was terrified. My sixteen-year-old mortal instincts were screaming, *RUN!* My knees were knocking together, and my right eye had developed a nasty twitch. But the secret to dealing with plague spirits was to keep talking so as to appear in charge and unafraid. I trusted that this would allow my demigod companions time to come up with a clever plan to save me. I certainly *hoped* Meg and Percy were working on such a plan.

The spirit on the right bared his rotten teeth. “What will you strike us down with? Where is your booow?”

“It appears to be missing,” I agreed. “But is it really? What if it’s cleverly hidden under this Led Zeppelin T-shirt, and I am about to whip it out and shoot you all?”

The nosoi shuffled nervously.

“Yooou lie,” said the one in the middle.

Percy cleared his throat. “Um, hey, Apollo…”

Finally! I thought.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I told him. “You and Meg have come up with a clever plan to hold off these spirits while I run away to camp. I hate to see you sacrifice yourselves, but—”

“That’s not what I was going to say.” Percy raised his blade. “I was going to ask what happens if I just slice and dice these mouth-breathers with Celestial bronze.”

The middle spirit chortled, his yellow eyes gleaming. “A sword is such a small weapon. It does not have the pooooetry of a good epidemic.”

“Stop right there!” I said. “You can’t claim both my plagues *and* my poetry!”

“You are right,” said the spirit. “Enough wooooords.”

The three corpses shambled forward. I thrust out my arms, hoping to blast them to dust. Nothing happened.

“This is insufferable!” I complained. “How do demigods do it without an auto-win power?”

Meg jabbed her tree branch into the nearest spirit’s chest. The branch stuck. Glittering smoke began swirling down the length of the wood.

“Let go!” I warned. “Don’t let the nosoi touch you!”

Meg released the branch and scampered away.

Meanwhile, Percy Jackson charged into battle. He swung his sword, dodging the spirits' attempts to snare him, but his efforts were futile. Whenever his blade connected with the nosoi, their bodies simply dissolved into glittery mist, then resolidified.

A spirit lunged to grab him. From the ground, Meg scooped up a frozen black peach and threw it with such force it embedded itself in the spirit's forehead, knocking him down.

"We gotta run," Meg decided.

"Yeah." Percy backtracked toward us. "I like that idea."

I knew running would not help. If it were possible to run from disease spirits, the medieval Europeans would've put on their track shoes and escaped the Black Death. (And FYI, the Black Death was *not* my fault. I took one century off to lie around the beach in Cabo, and came back and found that the nosoi had gotten loose and a third of the continent was dead. *Gods*, I was so irritated.)

But I was too terrified to argue. Meg and Percy sprinted off through the orchard, and I followed.

Percy pointed to a line of hills about a mile ahead. "That's the western border of camp. If we can just get there…"

We passed an irrigation tank on a tractor-trailer. With a casual flick of his hand, Percy caused the side of the tank to rupture. A wall of water crashed into the three nosoi behind us.

"That was good." Meg grinned, skipping along in her new green dress. "We're going to make it!"

No, I thought, we're not.

My chest ached. Each breath was a ragged wheeze. I resented that these two demigods could carry on a conversation while running for their lives while I, the immortal Apollo, was reduced to gasping like a catfish.

"We can't—" I gulped. "They'll just—"

Before I could finish, three glittering pillars of smoke plumed from the ground in front of us. Two of the nosoi solidified into cadavers—one with a peach for a third eye, the other with a tree branch sticking out of his chest.

The third spirit…Well, Percy didn't see it in time. He ran straight into the plume of smoke.

"Don't breathe!" I warned him.

Percy's eyes bugged out as if to say, *Seriously?* He fell to his knees, clawing at his throat. As a son of Poseidon, he could probably breathe underwater, but holding one's breath for an indeterminate amount of time was a different matter altogether.

Meg picked up another withered peach from the field, but it would offer her

little defense against the forces of darkness.

I tried to figure out how to help Percy—because I am all about helping—but the branch-impaled nosos charged at me. I turned and fled, running face-first into a tree. I'd like to tell you that was part of my plan, but even I, with all my poetic skill, cannot put a positive spin on it.

I found myself flat on my back, spots dancing in my eyes, the cadaverous visage of the plague spirit looming over me.

"Which fatal illness shall I use to kill the great Apolloooo?" the spirit gurgled. "Anthrax? Perhaps eboooola…"

"Hangnails," I suggested, trying to squirm away from my tormentor. "I live in fear of hangnails."

"I have the answer!" the spirit cried, rudely ignoring me. "Let's try this!"

He dissolved into smoke and settled over me like a glittering blanket.

8

Peaches in combat
I am hanging it up now
My brain exploded

I WILL NOT SAY my life passed before my eyes.

I wish it had. That would've taken several months, giving me time to figure out an escape plan.

Instead, my regrets passed before my eyes. Despite being a gloriously perfect being, I do have a few regrets. I remembered that day at Abbey Road Studios, when my envy led me to set rancor in the hearts of John and Paul and break up the Beatles. I remembered Achilles falling on the plains of Troy, cut down by an unworthy archer because of my wrath.

I saw Hyacinthus, his bronze shoulders and dark ringlets gleaming in the sunlight. Standing on the sideline of the discus field, he gave me a brilliant smile. *Even you can't throw that far,* he teased.

Watch me, I said. I threw the discus, then stared in horror as a gust of wind made it veer, inexplicably, toward Hyacinthus's handsome face.

And of course I saw *her*—the other love of my life—her fair skin transforming into bark, her hair sprouting green leaves, her eyes hardening into rivulets of sap.

Those memories brought back so much pain, you might think I would welcome the glittering plague mist descending over me.

Yet my new mortal self rebelled. I was too young to die! I hadn't even had my first kiss! (Yes, my godly catalogue of exes was filled with more beautiful people than a Kardashian party guest list, but none of that seemed real to me.)

If I'm being totally honest, I have to confess something else: all gods fear death, even when we are *not* encased in mortal forms.

That may seem silly. We are immortal. But as you've seen, immortality can

be taken away. (In my case, *three stinking times*.)

Gods know about fading. They know about being forgotten over the centuries. The idea of ceasing to exist altogether terrifies us. In fact—well, Zeus would not like me sharing this information, and if you tell anyone, I will deny I ever said it—but the truth is we gods are a little in awe of you mortals. You spend your whole lives knowing you will die. No matter how many friends and relatives you have, your puny existence will quickly be forgotten. How do you cope with it? Why are you not running around constantly screaming and pulling your hair out? Your bravery, I must admit, is quite admirable.

Now where was I?

Right. I was dying.

I rolled around in the mud, holding my breath. I tried to brush off the disease cloud, but it was not as easy as swatting a fly or an uppity mortal.

I caught a glimpse of Meg, playing a deadly game of tag with the third nosos, trying to keep a peach tree between herself and the spirit. She yelled something to me, but her voice seemed tinny and far away.

Somewhere to my left, the ground shook. A miniature geyser erupted from the field. Percy crawled toward it desperately. He thrust his face in the water, washing away the smoke.

My eyesight began to dim.

Percy struggled to his feet. He ripped out the source of the geyser—an irrigation pipe—and turned the water on me.

Normally I do not like being doused. Every time I go camping with Artemis, she likes to wake me up with a bucket of ice-cold water. But in this case, I didn't mind.

The water disrupted the smoke, allowing me to roll away and gasp for air. Nearby, our two gaseous enemies re-formed as dripping wet corpses, their yellow eyes glowing with annoyance.

Meg yelled again. This time I understood her words. "GET DOWN!"

I found this inconsiderate, since I'd only just gotten up. All around the orchard, the frozen blackened remnants of the harvest were beginning to levitate.

Believe me, in four thousand years I have seen some strange things. I have seen the dreaming face of Ouranos etched in stars across the heavens, and the full fury of Typhon as he raged across the earth. I've seen men turn into snakes, ants turn into men, and otherwise rational people dance the macarena.

But never before had I seen an uprising of frozen fruit.

Percy and I hit the ground as peaches shot around the orchard, ricocheting off trees like eight balls, ripping through the nosoi's cadaverous bodies. If I had been standing up, I would have been killed, but Meg simply stood there, unfazed

and unhurt, as frozen dead fruit zinged around her.

All three nosoi collapsed, riddled with holes. Every piece of fruit dropped to the ground.

Percy looked up, his eyes red and puffy. “Whah jus happened?”

He sounded congested, which meant he hadn’t completely escaped the effects of the plague cloud, but at least he wasn’t dead. That was generally a good sign.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Meg, is it safe?”

She was staring in amazement at the carnage of fruit, mangled corpses, and broken tree limbs. “I—I’m not sure.”

“How’d you do thah?” Percy snuffled.

Meg looked horrified. “I didn’t! I just knew it would happen.”

One of the cadavers began to stir. It got up, wobbling on its heavily perforated legs.

“But you *did* doooo it,” the spirit growled. “Yooou are strong, child.”

The other two corpses rose.

“Not strong enough,” said the second nosos. “We will finish you now.”

The third spirit bared his rotten teeth. “Your guardian would be sooooo disappointed.”

Guardian? Perhaps the spirit meant me. When in doubt, I usually assumed the conversation was about me.

Meg looked as if she’d been punched in the gut. Her face paled. Her arms trembled. She stamped her foot and yelled, “NO!”

More peaches swirled into the air. This time the fruit blurred together in a fructose dust devil, until standing in front of Meg was a creature like a pudgy human toddler wearing only a linen diaper. Protruding from his back were wings made of leafy branches. His babyish face might have been cute except for the glowing green eyes and pointy fangs. The creature snarled and snapped at the air.

“Oh, no.” Percy shook his head. “I hate these things.”

The three nosoi also did not look pleased. They edged away from the snarling baby.

“Wh-what is it?” Meg asked.

I stared at her in disbelief. She had to be the cause of this fruit-based strangeness, but she looked as shocked as we were. Unfortunately, if Meg didn’t know how she had summoned this creature, she would not know how to make it go away, and like Percy Jackson, I was no fan of *karpoi*.

“It’s a grain spirit,” I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “I’ve never seen a peach karpos before, but if it’s as vicious as other types…”

I was about to say, *we're doomed,* but that seemed both obvious and depressing.

The peach baby turned toward the nosoi. For a moment, I feared he would make some hellish alliance—an axis of evil between illnesses and fruits.

The middle corpse, the one with the peach in his forehead, inched backward. "Do not interfere," he warned the karpos. "We will not allooow—"

The peach baby launched himself at the nosos and bit his head off.

That is not a figure of speech. The karpos's fanged mouth unhinged, expanding to an unbelievable circumference, then closed around the cadaver's head, and chomped it off in one bite.

Oh, dear…I hope you weren't eating dinner as you read that.

In a matter of seconds, the nosos had been torn to shreds and devoured.

Understandably, the other two nosoi retreated, but the karpos crouched and sprang. He landed on the second corpse and proceeded to rip it into plague-flavored Cream of Wheat.

The last spirit dissolved into glittering smoke and tried to fly away, but the peach baby spread his leafy wings and launched himself in pursuit. He opened his mouth and inhaled the sickness, snapping and swallowing until every wisp of smoke was gone.

He landed in front of Meg and belched. His green eyes gleamed. He did not appear even slightly sick, which I suppose wasn't surprising, since human diseases don't infect fruit trees. Instead, even after eating three whole nosoi, the little fellow looked hungry.

He howled and beat his small chest. "Peaches!"

Slowly, Percy raised his sword. His nose was still red and runny, and his face was puffy. "Meg, don move," he snuffled. "I'm gonna—"

"No!" she said. "Don't hurt him."

She put her hand tentatively on the creature's curly head. "You saved us," she told the karpos. "Thank you."

I started mentally preparing a list of herbal remedies for regenerating severed limbs, but to my surprise, the peach baby did not bite off Meg's hand. Instead he hugged Meg's leg and glared at us as if daring us to approach.

"Peaches," he growled.

"He likes you," Percy noted. "Um…why?"

"I don't know," Meg said. "Honestly, I didn't summon him!"

I was certain Meg *had* summoned him, intentionally or unintentionally. I also had some ideas now about her godly parentage, and some questions about this "guardian" that the spirits had mentioned, but I decided it would be better to interrogate her when she did not have a snarling carnivorous toddler wrapped

around her leg.

"Well, whatever the case," I said, "we owe the karpos our lives. This brings to mind an expression I coined ages ago: A peach a day keeps the plague spirits away!"

Percy sneezed. "I thought it was apples and doctors."

The karpos hissed.

"Or peaches," Percy said. "Peaches work too."

"Peaches," agreed the karpos.

Percy wiped his nose. "Not criticizing, but why is he grooting?"

Meg frowned. "Grooting?"

"Yeah, like thah character in the movie…only saying one thing over and over."

"I'm afraid I haven't seen that movie," I said. "But this karpos does seem to have a very…targeted vocabulary."

"Maybe Peaches is his name." Meg stroked the karpos's curly brown hair, which elicited a demonic purring from the creature's throat. "That's what I'll call him."

"Whoa, you are not adopting thah—" Percy sneezed with such force, another irrigation pipe exploded behind him, sending up a row of tiny geysers. "Ugh. Sick."

"You're lucky," I said. "Your trick with the water diluted the spirit's power. Instead of getting a deadly illness, you got a head cold."

"I hate head colds." His green irises looked like they were sinking in a sea of bloodshot. "Neither of you got sick?"

Meg shook her head.

"I have an excellent constitution," I said. "No doubt that's what saved me."

"And the fact thah I hosed the smoke off of you," Percy said.

"Well, yes."

Percy stared at me as if waiting for something. After an awkward moment, it occurred to me that if he was a god and I was a worshipper, he might expect gratitude.

"Ah…thank you," I said.

He nodded. "No problem."

I relaxed a little. If he had demanded a sacrifice, like a white bull or a fatted calf, I'm not sure what I would've done.

"Can we go now?" Meg asked.

"An excellent idea," I said. "Though I'm afraid Percy is in no condition—"

"I can drive you the rest of the way," he said. "If we can get my car out from between those trees…" He glanced in that direction and his expression turned

even more miserable. “Aw, Hades no….”

A police cruiser was pulling over on the side of the road. I imagined the officers’ eyes tracing the tire ruts in the mud, which led to the plowed-down fence and continued to the blue Toyota Prius wedged between two peach trees. The cruiser’s roof lights flashed on.

“Great,” Percy muttered. “If they tow the Prius, I’m dead. My mom and Paul *need* thah car.”

“Go talk to the officers,” I said. “You won’t be any use to us anyway in your current state.”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine,” Meg said. “You said the camp is right over those hills?”

“Right, but…” Percy scowled, probably trying to think straight through the effects of his cold. “Most people enter camp from the east, where Half-Blood Hill is. The western border is wilder—hills and woods, all heavily enchanted. If you’re not careful, you can get lost….” He sneezed again. “I’m still not even sure Apollo can get *in* if he’s fully mortal.”

“I’ll get in.” I tried to exude confidence. I had no alternative. If I was unable to enter Camp Half-Blood…No. I’d already been attacked twice on my first day as a mortal. There was no plan B that would keep me alive.

The police car’s doors opened.

“Go,” I urged Percy. “We’ll find our way through the woods. You explain to the police that you’re sick and you lost control of the car. They’ll go easy on you.”

Percy laughed. “Yeah. Cops love me almost as much as teachers do.” He glanced at Meg. “You sure you’re okay with the baby fruit demon?”

Peaches growled.

“All good,” Meg promised. “Go home. Rest. Get lots of fluids.”

Percy’s mouth twitched. “You’re telling a son of Poseidon to get lots of fluids? Okay, just try to survive until the weekend, will you? I’ll come to camp and check on you guys if I can. Be careful and—*CHOOOO!*”

Muttering unhappily, he touched the cap of his pen to his sword, turning it back into a simple ballpoint. A wise precaution before approaching law enforcement. He trudged down the hill, sneezing and sniffling.

“Officer?” he called. “Sorry, I’m up here. Can you tell me where Manhattan is?”

Meg turned to me. “Ready?”

I was soaking wet and shivering. I was having the worst day in the history of days. I was stuck with a scary girl and an even scarier peach baby. I was by no means ready for anything. But I also desperately wanted to reach camp. I might

find some friendly faces there—perhaps even jubilant worshippers who would bring me peeled grapes, Oreos, and other holy offerings.

"Sure," I said. "Let's go."

Peaches the karpos grunted. He gestured for us to follow, then scampered toward the hills. Maybe he knew the way. Maybe he just wanted to lead us to a grisly death.

Meg skipped after him, swinging from tree branches and cartwheeling through the mud as the mood took her. You might've thought we'd just finished a nice picnic rather than a battle with plague-ridden cadavers.

I turned my face to the sky. "Are you sure, Zeus? It's not too late to tell me this was an elaborate prank and recall me to Olympus. I've learned my lesson. I promise."

The gray winter clouds did not respond. With a sigh, I jogged after Meg and her homicidal new minion.

9

A walk through the woods
Voices driving me bonkers
I hate spaghetti

I SIGHED WITH RELIEF. "This should be easy."

Granted, I'd said the same thing before I fought Poseidon in hand-to-hand combat, and that had *not* turned out to be easy. Nevertheless, our path into Camp Half-Blood looked straightforward enough. For starters, I was pleased I could *see* the camp, since it was normally shielded from mortal eyes. This boded well for me getting in.

From where we stood at the top of a hill, the entire valley spread out below us: roughly three square miles of woods, meadows, and strawberry fields bordered by Long Island Sound to the north and rolling hills on the other three sides. Just below us, a dense forest of evergreens covered the western third of the vale.

Beyond that, the buildings of Camp Half-Blood gleamed in the wintry light: the amphitheater, the sword-fighting stadium, the open-air dining pavilion with its white marble columns. A trireme floated in the canoe lake. Twenty cabins lined the central green where the communal hearth fire glowed cheerfully.

At the edge of the strawberry fields stood the Big House: a four-story Victorian painted sky blue with white trim. My friend Chiron would be inside, probably having tea by the fireplace. I would find sanctuary at last.

My gaze rose to the far end of the valley. There, on the tallest hill, the Athena Parthenos shone in all its gold-and-alabaster glory. Once, the massive statue had graced the Parthenon in Greece. Now it presided over Camp Half-Blood, protecting the valley from intruders. Even from here I could feel its power, like the subsonic thrum of a mighty engine. Old Gray Eyes was on the lookout for threats, being her usual vigilant, no-fun, all-business self.

Personally, I would have installed a more interesting statue—of myself, for instance. Still, the panorama of Camp Half-Blood was an impressive sight. My mood always improved when I saw the place—a small reminder of the good old days when mortals knew how to build temples and do proper burnt sacrifices. Ah, everything was better in ancient Greece! Well, except for a few small improvements modern humans had made—the Internet, chocolate croissants, life expectancy.

Meg's mouth hung open. "How come I've never heard about this place? Do you need tickets?"

I chuckled. I always enjoyed the chance to enlighten a clueless mortal. "You see, Meg, magical borders camouflage the valley. From the outside, most humans would spy nothing here except boring farmland. If they approached, they would get turned around and find themselves wandering out again. Believe me, I tried to get a pizza delivered to camp once. It was quite annoying."

"You ordered a pizza?"

"Never mind," I said. "As for tickets…it's true the camp doesn't let in just anybody, but you're in luck. I know the management."

Peaches growled. He sniffed the ground, then chomped a mouthful of dirt and spit it out.

"He doesn't like the taste of this place," Meg said.

"Yes, well…" I frowned at the karpos. "Perhaps we can find him some potting soil or fertilizer when we arrive. I'll convince the demigods to let him in, but it would be helpful if he doesn't bite their heads off—at least not right away."

Peaches muttered something about peaches.

"Something doesn't feel right." Meg bit her nails. "Those woods…Percy said they were wild and enchanted and stuff."

I, too, felt as if something was amiss, but I chalked this up to my general dislike of forests. For reasons I'd rather not go into, I find them…uncomfortable places. Nevertheless, with our goal in sight, my usual optimism was returning.

"Don't worry," I assured Meg. "You're traveling with a god!"

"Ex-god."

"I wish you wouldn't keep harping on that. Anyway, the campers are very friendly. They'll welcome us with tears of joy. And wait until you see the orientation video!"

"The what?"

"I directed it myself! Now, come along. The woods can't be that bad."

The woods were that bad.

As soon as we entered their shadows, the trees seemed to crowd us. Trunks closed ranks, blocking old paths and opening new ones. Roots writhed across the forest floor, making an obstacle course of bumps, knots, and loops. It was like trying to walk across a giant bowl of spaghetti.

The thought of spaghetti made me hungry. It had only been a few hours since Sally Jackson's seven-layer dip and sandwiches, but my mortal stomach was already clenching and squelching for food. The sounds were quite annoying, especially while walking through dark scary woods. Even the karpos Peaches was starting to smell good to me, giving me visions of cobbler and ice cream.

As I said earlier, I was generally not a fan of the woods. I tried to convince myself that the trees were not watching me, scowling and whispering among themselves. They were just trees. Even if they had dryad spirits, those dryads couldn't possibly hold me responsible for what had happened thousands of years ago on a different continent.

Why not? I asked myself. *You still hold yourself responsible.*

I told myself to stuff a sock in it.

We hiked for hours…much longer than it should have taken to reach the Big House. Normally I could navigate by the sun—which shouldn't be a surprise, since I spent millennia driving it across the sky—but under the canopy of trees, the light was diffuse, the shadows confusing.

After we passed the same boulder for the third time, I stopped and admitted the obvious. "I have no idea where we are."

Meg plopped herself down onto a fallen log. In the green light, she looked more like a dryad than ever, though tree spirits do not often wear red sneakers and hand-me-down fleece jackets.

"Don't you have any wilderness skills?" she asked. "Reading moss on the sides of trees? Following tracks?"

"That's more my sister's thing," I said.

"Maybe Peaches can help." Meg turned to her karpos. "Hey, can you find us a way out of the woods?"

For the past few miles, the karpos had been muttering nervously, cutting his eyes from side to side. Now he sniffed the air, his nostrils quivering. He tilted his head.

His face flushed bright green. He emitted a distressed bark, then dissolved in a swirl of leaves.

Meg shot to her feet. "Where'd he go?"

I scanned the woods. I suspected Peaches had done the intelligent thing. He'd sensed danger approaching and abandoned us. I didn't want to suggest that

to Meg, though. She'd already become quite fond of the karpos. (Ridiculous, getting attached to a small dangerous creature. Then again, we gods got attached to humans, so I had no room to criticize.)

"Perhaps he went scouting," I suggested. "Perhaps we should—"

APOLLO.

The voice reverberated in my head, as if someone had installed Bose speakers behind my eyes. It was not the voice of my conscience. My conscience was not female, and it was not that loud. Yet something about the woman's tone was eerily familiar.

"What's wrong?" Meg asked.

The air turned sickly sweet. The trees loomed over me like trigger hairs of a Venus flytrap.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of my face.

"We can't stay here," I said. "Attend me, mortal."

"Excuse me?" Meg said.

"Uh, I mean come on!"

We ran, stumbling over tree roots, fleeing blindly through a maze of branches and boulders. We reached a clear stream over a bed of gravel. I barely slowed down. I waded in, sinking shin-deep into the ice-cold water.

The voice spoke again: *FIND ME*.

This time it was so loud, it stabbed through my forehead like a railroad spike. I stumbled, falling to my knees.

"Hey!" Meg gripped my arm. "Get up!"

"You didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?"

THE FALL OF THE SUN, the voice boomed. *THE FINAL VERSE.*

I collapsed face-first into the stream.

"Apollo!" Meg rolled me over, her voice tight with alarm. "Come on! I can't carry you!"

Yet she tried. She dragged me across the river, scolding me and cursing until, with her help, I managed to crawl to shore.

I lay on my back, staring wildly at the forest canopy. My soaked clothes were so cold they burned. My body trembled like an open E string on an electric bass.

Meg tugged off my wet winter coat. Her own coat was much too small for me, but she draped the warm dry fleece over my shoulders. "Keep yourself together," she ordered. "Don't go crazy on me."

My own laughter sounded brittle. "But I—I heard—"

THE FIRES WILL CONSUME ME. MAKE HASTE!

The voice splintered into a chorus of angry whispers. Shadows grew longer

and darker. Steam rose from my clothes, smelling like the volcanic fumes of Delphi.

Part of me wanted to curl into a ball and die. Part of me wanted to get up and run wildly after the voices—to find their source—but I suspected that if I tried, my sanity would be lost forever.

Meg was saying something. She shook my shoulders. She put her face nose-to-nose with mine so my own derelict reflection stared back at me from the lenses of her cat-eye glasses. She slapped me, *hard*, and I managed to decipher her words: "GET UP!"

Somehow I did. Then I doubled over and retched.

I hadn't vomited in centuries. I'd forgotten how unpleasant it was.

The next thing I knew, we were staggering along, Meg bearing most of my weight. The voices whispered and argued, tearing off little pieces of my mind and carrying them away into the forest. Soon I wouldn't have much left.

There was no point. I might as well wander off into the forest and go insane. The idea struck me as funny. I began to giggle.

Meg forced me to keep walking. I couldn't understand her words, but her tone was insistent and stubborn, with just enough anger to outweigh her own terror.

In my fractured mental state, I thought the trees were parting for us, grudgingly opening a path straight out of the woods. I saw a bonfire in the distance, and the open meadows of Camp Half-Blood.

It occurred to me that Meg was talking to the trees, telling them to get out of the way. The idea was ridiculous, and at the moment it seemed hilarious. Judging from the steam billowing from my clothes, I guessed I was running a fever of about a hundred and six.

I was laughing hysterically as we stumbled out of the forest, straight toward the campfire where a dozen teenagers sat making s'mores. When they saw us, they rose. In their jeans and winter coats, with assorted weapons at their sides, they were the dourest bunch of marshmallow roasters I had ever seen.

I grinned. "Oh, hi! I'm Apollo!"

My eyes rolled up in my head, and I passed out.

10

My bus is in flames
My son is older than me
Please, Zeus, make it stop

I DREAMED I WAS DRIVING the sun chariot across the sky. I had the top down in Maserati mode. I was cruising along, honking at jet planes to get out of my way, enjoying the smell of cold stratosphere, and bopping to my favorite jam: Alabama Shakes' "Rise to the Sun."

I was thinking about transforming the Spyder into a Google self-driving car. I wanted to get out my lute and play a scorching solo that would make Brittany Howard proud.

Then a woman appeared in my passenger seat. "You've got to hurry, man."

I almost jumped out of the sun.

My guest was dressed like a Libyan queen of old. (I should know. I dated a few of them.) Her gown swirled with red, black, and gold floral designs. Her long dark hair was crowned with a tiara that looked like a curved miniature ladder—two gold rails lined with rungs of silver. Her face was mature but stately, the way a benevolent queen should look.

So definitely not Hera, then. Besides, Hera would never smile at me so kindly. Also…this woman wore a large metal peace symbol around her neck, which did not seem like Hera's style.

Still, I felt I should know her. Despite the elder-hippie vibe, she was so attractive that I assumed we must be related.

"Who are you?" I asked.

Her eyes flashed a dangerous shade of gold, like a feline predator's. "Follow the voices."

A lump swelled in my throat. I tried to think straight, but my brain felt like it had been recently run through a Vitamix. "I heard you in the woods….Were you

—were you speaking a prophecy?”

“Find the gates.” She grabbed my wrist. “You’ve gotta find them first, you dig?”

“But—”

The woman burst into flames. I pulled back my singed wrist and grabbed the wheel as the sun chariot plunged into a nosedive. The Maserati morphed into a school bus—a mode I only used when I had to transport a large number of people. Smoke filled the cabin.

Somewhere behind me, a nasal voice said, “By all means, find the gates.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Through the smoke, I saw a portly man in a mauve suit. He lounged across the backseat, where the troublemakers normally sat. Hermes was fond of that seat—but this man was not Hermes.

He had a weak jawline, an overlarge nose, and a beard that wrapped around his double chin like a helmet strap. His hair was curly and dark like mine, except not as fashionably tousled or luxuriant. His lip curled as if he smelled something unpleasant. Perhaps it was the burning seats of the bus.

“Who are you?” I yelled, desperately trying to pull the chariot out of its dive. “Why are you on my bus?”

The man smiled, which made his face even uglier. “My own forefather does not recognize me? I’m hurt!”

I tried to place him. My cursed mortal brain was too small, too inflexible. It had jettisoned four thousand years of memories like so much ballast.

“I—I don’t,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

The man laughed as flames licked at his purple sleeves. “You’re not sorry *yet*, but you will be. Find me the gates. Lead me to the Oracle. I’ll enjoy burning it down!”

Fire consumed me as the sun chariot careened toward the earth. I gripped the wheel and stared in horror as a massive bronze face loomed outside the windshield. It was the face of the man in purple, fashioned from an expanse of metal larger than my bus. As we hurtled toward it, the features shifted and became my own.

Then I woke, shivering and sweating.

“Easy.” Someone’s hand rested on my shoulder. “Don’t try to sit up.”

Naturally I tried to sit up.

My bedside attendant was a young man about my age—my *mortal* age—with shaggy blond hair and blue eyes. He wore doctor’s scrubs with an open ski jacket, the words OKEMO MOUNTAIN stitched on the pocket. His face had a skier’s tan. I felt I should know him. (I’d been having that sensation a lot since my fall from Olympus.)

I was lying in a cot in the middle of a cabin. On either side, bunk beds lined the walls. Rough cedar beams ribbed the ceiling. The white plaster walls were bare except for a few hooks for coats and weapons.

It could have been a modest abode in almost any age—ancient Athens, medieval France, the farmlands of Iowa. It smelled of clean linen and dried sage. The only decorations were some flowerpots on the windowsill, where cheerful yellow blooms were thriving despite the cold weather outside.

"Those flowers…" My voice was hoarse, as if I'd inhaled the smoke from my dream. "Those are from Delos, my sacred island."

"Yep," said the young man. "They only grow in and around Cabin Seven—*your* cabin. Do you know who I am?"

I studied his face. The calmness of his eyes, the smile resting easily on his lips, the way his hair curled around his ears…I had a vague memory of a woman, an alt-country singer named Naomi Solace, whom I'd met in Austin. I blushed thinking about her even now. To my teenaged self, our romance felt like something that I'd watched in a movie a long ago time—a movie my parents wouldn't have allowed me to see.

But this boy was definitely Naomi's son.

Which meant he was *my* son too.

Which felt very, very strange.

"You're Will Solace," I said. "My, ah…erm—"

"Yeah," Will agreed. "It's awkward."

My frontal lobe did a one-eighty inside my skull. I listed sideways.

"Whoa, there." Will steadied me. "I tried to heal you, but honestly, I don't understand what's wrong. You've got blood, not ichor. You're recovering quickly from your injuries, but your vital signs are completely human."

"Don't remind me."

"Yeah, well…" He put his hand on my forehead and frowned in concentration. His fingers trembled slightly. "I didn't *know* any of that until I tried to give you nectar. Your lips started steaming. I almost killed you."

"Ah…" I ran my tongue across my bottom lip, which felt heavy and numb. I wondered if that explained my dream about smoke and fire. I hoped so. "I guess Meg forgot to tell you about my condition."

"I guess she did." Will took my wrist and checked my pulse. "You seem to be about my age, fifteen or so. Your heart rate is back to normal. Ribs are mending. Nose is swollen, but not broken."

"And I have acne," I lamented. "And flab."

Will tilted his head. "You're mortal, and *that's* what you're worried about?"

"You're right. I'm powerless. Weaker even than you puny demigods!"

“Gee, thanks….”

I got the feeling that he almost said *Dad* but managed to stop himself.

It was difficult to think of this young man as my son. He was so poised, so unassuming, so free of acne. He also didn’t appear to be awestruck in my presence. In fact, the corner of his mouth had started twitching.

“Are—are you amused?” I demanded.

Will shrugged. “Well, it’s either find this funny or freak out. My dad, the god Apollo, is a fifteen-year-old—”

“Sixteen,” I corrected. “Let’s go with sixteen.”

“A sixteen-year-old mortal, lying in a cot in my cabin, and with all my healing arts—which I got from *you*—I still can’t figure out how to fix you.”

“There is no fixing this,” I said miserably. “I am cast out of Olympus. My fate is tied to a girl named Meg. It could not be worse!”

Will laughed, which I thought took a great deal of gall. “Meg seems cool. She’s already poked Connor Stoll in the eyes and kicked Sherman Yang in the crotch.”

“She did *what*?”

“She’ll get along just fine here. She’s waiting for you outside—along with most of the campers.” Will’s smile faded. “Just so you’re prepared, they’re asking a lot of questions. Everybody is wondering if your arrival, your *mortal* situation, has anything to do with what’s been going on at camp.”

I frowned. “What has been going on at camp?”

The cabin door opened. Two more demigods stepped inside. One was a tall boy of about thirteen, his skin burnished bronze and his cornrows woven like DNA helixes. In his black wool peacoat and black jeans, he looked as if he’d stepped from the deck of an eighteenth-century whaling vessel. The other newcomer was a younger girl in olive camouflage. She had a full quiver on her shoulder, and her short ginger hair was dyed with a shock of bright green, which seemed to defeat the point of wearing camouflage.

I smiled, delighted that I actually remembered their names.

“Austin,” I said. “And Kayla, isn’t it?”

Rather than falling to their knees and blubbering gratefully, they gave each other a nervous glance.

“So it’s really you,” Kayla said.

Austin frowned. “Meg told us you were beaten up by a couple of thugs. She said you had no powers and you went hysterical out in the woods.”

My mouth tasted like burnt school bus upholstery. “Meg talks too much.”

“But you’re mortal?” Kayla asked. “As in completely mortal? Does that mean I’m going to lose my archery skills? I can’t even qualify for the Olympics

until I'm sixteen!"

"And if I lose my music…" Austin shook his head. "No, man, that's wrong. My last video got, like, five hundred thousand views in a week. What am I supposed to do?"

It warmed my heart that my children had the right priorities: their skills, their images, their views on YouTube. Say what you will about gods being absentee parents; our children inherit many of our finest personality traits.

"My problems should not affect you," I promised. "If Zeus went around retroactively yanking my divine power out of all my descendants, half the medical schools in the country would be empty. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame would disappear. The Tarot-card reading industry would collapse overnight!"

Austin's shoulders relaxed. "That's a relief."

"So if you die while you're mortal," Kayla said, "we won't disappear?"

"Guys," Will interrupted, "why don't you run to the Big House and tell Chiron that our…our *patient* is conscious. I'll bring him along in a minute. And, uh, see if you can disperse the crowd outside, okay? I don't want everybody rushing Apollo at once."

Kayla and Austin nodded sagely. As my children, they no doubt understood the importance of controlling the paparazzi.

As soon as they were gone, Will gave me an apologetic smile. "They're in shock. We all are. It'll take some time to get used to…whatever this is."

"You do not seem shocked," I said.

Will laughed under his breath. "I'm terrified. But one thing you learn as head counselor: you have to keep it together for everyone else. Let's get you on your feet."

It was not easy. I fell twice. My head spun, and my eyes felt as if they were being microwaved in their sockets. Recent dreams continued to churn in my brain like river silt, muddying my thoughts—the woman with the crown and the peace symbol, the man in the purple suit. *Lead me to the Oracle. I'll enjoy burning it down!*

The cabin began to feel stifling. I was anxious to get some fresh air.

One thing my sister Artemis and I agree on: every worthwhile pursuit is better outdoors than indoors. Music is best played under the dome of heaven. Poetry should be shared in the *agora.* Archery is definitely easier outside, as I can attest after that one time I tried target practice in my father's throne room. And driving the sun…well, that's not really an indoor sport either.

Leaning on Will for support, I stepped outside. Kayla and Austin had succeeded in shooing the crowd away. The only one waiting for me—oh, joy and happiness—was my young overlord, Meg, who had apparently now gained fame

at camp as Crotchkicker McCaffrey.

She still wore Sally Jackson's hand-me-down green dress, though it was a bit dirtier now. Her leggings were ripped and torn. On her bicep, a line of butterfly bandages closed a nasty cut she must have gotten in the woods.

She took one look at me, scrunched up her face, and stuck out her tongue. "You look *yuck*."

"And you, Meg," I said, "are as charming as ever."

She adjusted her glasses until they were just crooked enough to be annoying. "Thought you were going to die."

"Glad to disappoint you."

"Nah." She shrugged. "You still owe me a year of service. We're bound, whether you like it or not!"

I sighed. It was ever so wonderful to be back in Meg's company.

"I suppose I should thank you…." I had a hazy memory of my delirium in the forest, Meg carrying me along, the trees seeming to part before us. "How did you get us out of the woods?"

Her expression turned guarded. "Dunno. Luck." She jabbed a thumb at Will Solace. "From what he's been telling me, it's a good thing we got out before nightfall."

"Why?"

Will started to answer, then apparently thought better of it. "I should let Chiron explain. Come on."

I rarely visited Camp Half-Blood in winter. The last time had been three years ago, when a girl named Thalia Grace crash-landed my bus in the canoe lake.

I expected the camp to be sparsely populated. I knew most demigods only came for the summer, leaving a small core of year-rounders during the school term—those who for various reasons found camp the only safe place they could live.

Still, I was struck by how few demigods I saw. If Cabin Seven was any indication, each god's cabin could hold beds for about twenty campers. That meant a maximum capacity of four hundred demigods—enough for several phalanxes or one really amazing yacht party.

Yet, as we walked across camp, I saw no more than a dozen people. In the fading light of sunset, a lone girl was scaling the climbing wall as lava flowed down either side. At the lake, a crew of three checked the rigging on the trireme.

Some campers had found reasons to be outside just so they could gawk at me. Over by the hearth, one young man sat polishing his shield, watching me in its reflective surface. Another fellow glared at me as he spliced barbed wire

outside the Ares cabin. From the awkward way he walked, I assumed he was Sherman Yang of the recently kicked crotch.

In the doorway of the Hermes cabin, two girls giggled and whispered as I passed. Normally this sort of attention wouldn't have fazed me. My magnetism was understandably irresistible. But now my face burned. Me—the manly paragon of romance—reduced to a gawky, inexperienced boy!

I would have screamed at the heavens for this unfairness, but that would've been super-embarrassing.

We made our way through the fallow strawberry fields. Up on Half-Blood Hill, the Golden Fleece glinted in the lowest branch of a tall pine tree. Whiffs of steam rose from the head of Peleus, the guardian dragon coiled around the base of the trunk. Next to the tree, the Athena Parthenos looked angry red in the sunset. Or perhaps she just wasn't happy to see me. (Athena had never gotten over our little tiff during the Trojan War.)

Halfway down the hillside, I spotted the Oracle's cave, its entrance shrouded by thick burgundy curtains. The torches on either side stood unlit—usually a sign that my prophetess, Rachel Dare, was not in residence. I wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved.

Even when she was not channeling prophecies, Rachel was a wise young lady. I had hoped to consult her about my problems. On the other hand, since her prophetic power had apparently stopped working (which I suppose in some *small* part was my fault), I wasn't sure Rachel would want to see me. She would expect explanations from her Main Man, and while I had invented *mansplaining* and was its foremost practitioner, I had no answers to give her.

The dream of the flaming bus stayed with me: the groovy crowned woman urging me to find the gates, the ugly mauve-suited man threatening to burn the Oracle.

Well…the cave was right there. I wasn't sure why the woman in the crown was having such trouble finding it, or why the ugly man would be so intent on burning its "gates," which amounted to nothing more than purple curtains.

Unless the dream was referring to something other than the Oracle of Delphi….

I rubbed my throbbing temples. I kept reaching for memories that weren't there, trying to plunge into my vast lake of knowledge only to find it had been reduced to a kiddie pool. You simply can't do much with a kiddie pool brain.

On the porch of the Big House, a dark-haired young man was waiting for us. He wore faded black trousers, a Ramones T-shirt (bonus points for musical taste), and a black leather bomber jacket. At his side hung a Stygian iron sword.

"I remember you," I said. "Is it Nicholas, son of Hades?"

“Nico di Angelo.” He studied me, his eyes sharp and colorless, like broken glass. “So it’s true. You’re completely mortal. There’s an aura of death around you—a thick possibility of death.”

Meg snorted. “Sounds like a weather forecast.”

I did not find this amusing. Being face-to-face with a son of Hades, I recalled the many mortals I had sent to the Underworld with my plague arrows. It had always seemed like good clean fun—meting out richly deserved punishments for wicked deeds. Now, I began to understand the terror in my victims’ eyes. I did not want an aura of death hanging over me. I definitely did not want to stand in judgment before Nico di Angelo’s father.

Will put his hand on Nico’s shoulder. “Nico, we need to have another talk about your people skills.”

“Hey, I’m just stating the obvious. If this *is* Apollo, and he dies, we’re all in trouble.”

Will turned to me. “I apologize for my boyfriend.”

Nico rolled his eyes. “Could you not—”

“Would you prefer *special guy*?” Will asked. “Or *significant other*?”

“Significant *annoyance*, in your case,” Nico grumbled.

“Oh, I’ll get you for that.”

Meg wiped her dripping nose. “You guys fight a lot. I thought we were going to see a centaur.”

“And here I am.” The screen door opened. Chiron trotted out, ducking his head to avoid the doorframe.

From the waist up, he looked every bit the professor he often pretended to be in the mortal world. His brown wool jacket had patches on the elbows. His plaid dress shirt did not quite match his green tie. His beard was neatly trimmed, but his hair would have failed the tidiness inspection required for a proper rat’s nest.

From the waist down, he was a white stallion.

My old friend smiled, though his eyes were stormy and distracted. “Apollo, it’s good you are here. We need to talk about the disappearances.”

11

Check your spam folder
The prophecies might be there
No? Well, I'm stumped. Bye

MEG GAWKED. "He—he really *is* a centaur."

"Well spotted," I said. "I suppose the lower body of a horse is what gave him away?"

She punched me in the arm.

"Chiron," I said, "this is Meg McCaffrey, my new master and wellspring of aggravation. You were saying something about disappearances?"

Chiron's tail flicked. His hooves clopped on the planks of the porch.

He was immortal, yet his visible age seemed to vary from century to century. I did not remember his whiskers ever being so gray, or the lines around his eyes so pronounced. Whatever was happening at camp must not have been helping his stress levels.

"Welcome, Meg." Chiron tried for a friendly tone, which I thought quite heroic, seeing as…well, *Meg.* "I understand you showed great bravery in the woods. You brought Apollo here despite many dangers. I'm glad to have you at Camp Half-Blood."

"Thanks," said Meg. "You're really tall. Don't you hit your head on light fixtures?"

Chiron chuckled. "Sometimes. If I want to be closer to human size, I have a magical wheelchair that allows me to compact my lower half into…Actually, that's not important now."

"Disappearances," I prompted. "What has disappeared?"

"Not *what*, but *who*," Chiron said. "Let's talk inside. Will, Nico, could you please tell the other campers we'll gather for dinner in one hour? I'll give everyone an update then. In the meantime, no one should roam the camp alone.

Use the buddy system."

"Understood." Will looked at Nico. "Will you be my buddy?"

"You are a dork," Nico announced.

The two of them strolled off bickering.

At this point, you may be wondering how I felt seeing my son with Nico di Angelo. I'll admit I did not understand Will's attraction to a child of Hades, but if the dark foreboding type was what made Will happy…

Oh. Perhaps some of you are wondering how I felt seeing him with a boyfriend rather than a girlfriend. If that's the case, *please.* We gods are not hung up about such things. I myself have had…let's see, thirty-three mortal girlfriends and eleven mortal boyfriends? I've lost count. My two greatest loves were, of course, Daphne and Hyacinthus, but when you're a god as popular as I am—

Hold on. Did I just tell you who I liked? I did, didn't I? Gods of Olympus, forget I mentioned their names! I am so embarrassed. Please don't say anything. In this mortal life, I've never been in love with *anyone*!

I am so confused.

Chiron led us into the living room, where comfy leather couches made a V facing the stone fireplace. Above the mantel, a stuffed leopard head was snoring contentedly.

"Is it alive?" Meg asked.

"Quite." Chiron trotted over to his wheelchair. "That's Seymour. If we speak quietly, we should be able to avoid waking him."

Meg immediately began exploring the living room. Knowing her, she was searching for small objects to throw at the leopard to wake him up.

Chiron settled into his wheelchair. He placed his rear legs into the false compartment of the seat, then backed up, magically compacting his equine hindquarters until he looked like a man sitting down. To complete the illusion, hinged front panels swung closed, giving him fake human legs. Normally those legs were fitted with slacks and loafers to augment his "professor" disguise, but today it seemed Chiron was going for a different look.

"That's new," I said.

Chiron glanced down at his shapely female mannequin legs, dressed in fishnet stockings and red sequined high heels. He sighed heavily. "I see the Hermes cabin have been watching *Rocky Horror Picture Show* again. I will have to have a chat with them."

Rocky Horror Picture Show brought back fond memories. I used to cosplay as Rocky at the midnight showings, because, naturally, the character's perfect physique was based on my own.

"Let me guess," I said. "Connor and Travis Stoll are the pranksters?"

From a nearby basket, Chiron grabbed a flannel blanket and spread it over his fake legs, though the ruby shoes still peeked out at the bottom. “Actually, Travis went off to college last autumn, which has mellowed Connor quite a bit.”

Meg looked over from the old *Pac-Man* arcade game. “I poked that guy Connor in the eyes.”

Chiron winced. “That’s nice, dear….At any rate, we have Julia Feingold and Alice Miyazawa now. They have taken up pranking duty. You’ll meet them soon enough.”

I recalled the girls who had been giggling at me from the Hermes cabin doorway. I felt myself blushing all over again.

Chiron gestured toward the couches. “Please sit.”

Meg moved on from *Pac-Man* (having given the game twenty seconds of her time) and began literally climbing the wall. Dormant grapevines festooned the dining area—no doubt the work of my old friend Dionysus. Meg scaled one of the thicker trunks, trying to reach the Gorgon-hair chandelier.

“Ah, Meg,” I said, “perhaps you should watch the orientation film while Chiron and I talk?”

“I know plenty,” she said. “I talked to the campers while you were passed out. ‘Safe place for modern demigods.’ Blah, blah, blah.”

“Oh, but the film is very good,” I urged. “I shot it on a tight budget in the 1950s, but some of the camera work was revolutionary. You should really—”

The grapevine peeled away from the wall. Meg crashed to the floor. She popped up completely unscathed, then spotted a platter of cookies on the sideboard. “Are those free?”

“Yes, child,” Chiron said. “Bring the tea as well, would you?”

So we were stuck with Meg, who draped her legs over the couch’s armrest, chomped on cookies, and threw crumbs at Seymour’s snoring head whenever Chiron wasn’t looking.

Chiron poured me a cup of Darjeeling. “I’m sorry Mr. D is not here to welcome you.”

“Mr. Dee?” Meg asked.

“Dionysus,” I explained. “The god of wine. Also the director of this camp.”

Chiron handed me my tea. “After the battle with Gaea, I thought Mr. D might return to camp, but he never did. I hope he’s all right.”

The old centaur looked at me expectantly, but I had nothing to share. The last six months were a complete void; I had no idea what the other Olympians might be up to.

“I don’t know anything,” I admitted. I hadn’t said those words very often in the last four millennia. They tasted bad. I sipped my tea, but that was no less

bitter. “I’m a bit behind on the news. I was hoping you could fill me in.”

Chiron did a poor job hiding his disappointment. “I see….”

I realized he had been hoping for help and guidance—the exact same things I needed from *him.* As a god, I was used to lesser beings relying on me—praying for this and pleading for that. But now that I was mortal, being relied upon was a little terrifying.

“So what is your crisis?” I asked. “You have the same look Cassandra had in Troy, or Jim Bowie at the Alamo—as if you’re under siege.”

Chiron did not dispute the comparison. He cupped his hands around his tea.

“You know that during the war with Gaea, the Oracle of Delphi stopped receiving prophecies. In fact, all known methods of divining the future suddenly failed.”

“Because the original cave of Delphi was retaken,” I said with a sigh, trying not to feel picked on.

Meg bounced a chocolate chip off Seymour the leopard’s nose. “Oracle of Delphi. Percy mentioned that.”

“Percy Jackson?” Chiron sat up. “Percy was with you?”

“For a time.” I recounted our battle in the peach orchard and Percy’s return to New York. “He said he would drive out this weekend if he could.”

Chiron looked disheartened, as if my company alone wasn’t good enough. Can you imagine?

“At any rate,” he continued, “we hoped that once the war was over, the Oracle might start working again. When it did not…Rachel became concerned.”

“Who’s Rachel?” Meg asked.

“Rachel Dare,” I said. “The Oracle.”

“Thought the Oracle was a place.”

“It is.”

“Then Rachel is a place, and she stopped working?”

Had I still been a god, I would have turned her into a blue-belly lizard and released her into the wilderness never to be seen again. The thought soothed me.

“The original Delphi was a place in Greece,” I told her. “A cavern filled with volcanic fumes, where people would come to receive guidance from my priestess, the Pythia.”

“Pythia.” Meg giggled. “That’s a funny word.”

“Yes. Ha-ha. So the Oracle is both a place and a person. When the Greek gods relocated to America back in…what was it, Chiron, 1860?”

Chiron seesawed his hand. “More or less.”

“I brought the Oracle here to continue speaking prophecies on my behalf. The power has passed down from priestess to priestess over the years. Rachel

Dare is the present Oracle."

From the cookie platter, Meg plucked the only Oreo, which I had been hoping to have myself. "Mm-kay. Is it too late to watch that movie?"

"Yes," I snapped. "Now, the way I gained possession of the Oracle of Delphi in the first place was by killing this monster called Python who lived in the depths of the cavern."

"A python like the snake," Meg said.

"Yes and no. The snake species is named after Python the monster, who is also rather snaky, but who is much bigger and scarier and devours small girls who talk too much. At any rate, last August, while I was…indisposed, my ancient foe Python was released from Tartarus. He reclaimed the cave of Delphi. That's why the Oracle stopped working."

"But if the Oracle is in America now, why does it matter if some snake monster takes over its old cave?"

That was about the longest sentence I had yet heard her speak. She'd probably done it just to spite me.

"It's too much to explain," I said. "You'll just have to—"

"Meg." Chiron gave her one of his heroically tolerant smiles. "The original site of the Oracle is like the deepest taproot of a tree. The branches and leaves of prophecy may extend across the world, and Rachel Dare may be our loftiest branch, but if the taproot is strangled, the whole tree is endangered. With Python back in residence at his old lair, the spirit of the Oracle has been completely blocked."

"Oh." Meg made a face at me. "Why didn't you just say so?"

Before I could strangle her like the annoying taproot she was, Chiron refilled my teacup.

"The larger problem," he said, "is that we have no other source of prophecies."

"Who cares?" Meg asked. "So you don't know the future. Nobody knows the future."

"Who cares?!" I shouted. "Meg McCaffrey, prophecies are the catalysts for every important event—every quest or battle, disaster or miracle, birth or death. Prophecies don't simply foretell the future. They shape it! They *allow* the future to happen."

"I don't get it."

Chiron cleared his throat. "Imagine prophecies are flower seeds. With the right seeds, you can grow any garden you desire. Without seeds, no growth is possible."

"Oh." Meg nodded. "That would suck."

I found it strange that Meg, a street urchin and Dumpster warrior, would relate so well to garden metaphors, but Chiron was an excellent teacher. He had picked up on something about the girl…an impression that had been lurking in the back of my mind as well. I hoped I was wrong about what it meant, but with my luck, I would be right. I usually was.

"So where is Rachel Dare?" I asked. "Perhaps if I spoke with her…?"

Chiron set down his tea. "Rachel planned to visit us during her winter vacation, but she never did. It might not mean anything…."

I leaned forward. It was not unheard of for Rachel Dare to be late. She was artistic, unpredictable, impulsive, and rule-averse—all qualities I dearly admired. But it wasn't like her not to show up at all.

"Or?" I asked.

"Or it might be part of the larger problem," Chiron said. "Prophecies are not the only things that have failed. Travel and communication have become difficult in the last few months. We haven't heard from our friends at Camp Jupiter in weeks. No new demigods have arrived. Satyrs aren't reporting from the field. Iris messages no longer work."

"Iris what?" Meg asked.

"Two-way visions," I said. "A form of communication overseen by the rainbow goddess. Iris has always been flighty…."

"Except that normal human communications are also on the fritz," Chiron said. "Of course, phones have always been dangerous for demigods—"

"Yeah, they attract monsters," Meg agreed. "I haven't used a phone in *forever*."

"A wise move," Chiron said. "But recently our phones have stopped working altogether. Mobile, landline, Internet…it doesn't seem to matter. Even the archaic form of communication known as *e-mail* is strangely unreliable. The messages simply don't arrive."

"Did you look in the junk folder?" I offered.

"I fear the problem is more complicated," Chiron said. "We have no communication with the outside world. We are alone and understaffed. You are the first newcomers in almost two months."

I frowned. "Percy Jackson mentioned nothing of this."

"I doubt Percy is even aware," Chiron said. "He's been busy with school. Winter is normally our quietest time. For a while, I was able to convince myself that the communication failures were nothing but an inconvenient happenstance. Then the disappearances started."

In the fireplace, a log slipped from the andiron. I may or may not have jumped in my seat.

“The disappearances, yes.” I wiped drops of tea from my pants and tried to ignore Meg’s snickering. “Tell me about those.”

“Three in the last month,” Chiron said. “First it was Cecil Markowitz from the Hermes cabin. One morning his bunk was simply empty. He didn’t say anything about wanting to leave. No one saw him go. And in the past few weeks, no one has seen or heard from him.”

“Children of Hermes do tend to sneak around,” I offered.

“At first, that’s what we thought,” said Chiron. “But a week later, Ellis Wakefield disappeared from the Ares cabin. Same story: empty bunk, no signs that he had either left on his own *or* was…ah, taken. Ellis was an impetuous young man. It was conceivable he might have charged off on some ill-advised adventure, but it made me uneasy. Then this morning we realized a third camper had vanished: Miranda Gardiner, head of the Demeter cabin. That was the worst news of all.”

Meg swung her feet off the armrest. “Why is that the worst?”

“Miranda is one of our senior counselors,” Chiron said. “She would never leave on her own without notice. She is too smart to be tricked away from camp, and too powerful to be forced. Yet something happened to her…something I can’t explain.”

The old centaur faced me. “Something is very wrong, Apollo. These problems may not be as alarming as the rise of Kronos or the awakening of Gaea, but in a way I find them even more unsettling, because I have never seen anything like this before.”

I recalled my dream of the burning sun bus. I thought of the voices I’d heard in the woods, urging me to wander off and find their source.

“These demigods…” I said. “Before they disappeared, did they act unusual in any way? Did they report…hearing things?”

Chiron raised an eyebrow. “Not that I am aware of. Why?”

I was reluctant to say more. I didn’t want to cause a panic without knowing what we were facing. When mortals panic, it can be an ugly scene, especially if they expect *me* to fix the problem.

Also, I will admit I felt a bit impatient. We had not yet addressed the most important issues—*mine*.

“It seems to me,” I said, “that our first priority is to bend all the camp’s resources to helping me regain my divine state. Then I can assist you with these other problems.”

Chiron stroked his beard. “But what if the problems are connected, my friend? What if the only way to restore you to Olympus is by reclaiming the Oracle of Delphi, thus freeing the power of prophecy? What if Delphi is the key

to it all?"

I had forgotten about Chiron's tendency to lay out obvious and logical conclusions that I tried to avoid thinking about. It was an infuriating habit.

"In my present state, that's impossible." I pointed at Meg. "Right now, my job is to serve this demigod, probably for a year. After I've done whatever tasks she assigns me, Zeus will judge that my sentence has been served, and I can once again become a god."

Meg pulled apart a Fig Newton. "I could order you to go to this Delphi place."

"No!" My voice cracked in midshriek. "You should assign me *easy* tasks—like starting a rock band, or just hanging out. Yes, hanging out is good."

Meg looked unconvinced. "Hanging out isn't a task."

"It is if you do it right. Camp Half-Blood can protect me while I hang out. After my year of servitude is up, I'll become a god. *Then* we can talk about how to restore Delphi."

Preferably, I thought, by ordering some demigods to undertake the quest for me.

"Apollo," Chiron said, "if demigods keep disappearing, we may not have a year. We may not have the strength to protect you. And, forgive me, but Delphi *is* your responsibility."

I tossed up my hands. "*I* wasn't the one who opened the Doors of Death and let Python out! Blame Gaea! Blame Zeus for his bad judgment! When the giants started to wake, I drew up a very clear *Twenty-Point Plan of Action to Protect Apollo and Also You Other Gods,* but he didn't even read it!"

Meg tossed half of her cookie at Seymour's head. "I still think it's your fault. Hey, look! He's awake!"

She said this as if the leopard had decided to wake up on his own rather than being beaned in the eye with a Fig Newton.

"RARR," Seymour complained.

Chiron wheeled his chair back from the table. "My dear, in that jar on the mantel, you'll find some Snausages. Why don't you feed him dinner? Apollo and I will wait on the porch."

We left Meg happily making three-point shots into Seymour's mouth with the treats.

Once Chiron and I reached the porch, he turned his wheelchair to face me. "She's an interesting demigod."

"*Interesting* is such a nonjudgmental term."

"She really summoned a karpos?"

"Well…the spirit appeared when she was in trouble. Whether she

consciously summoned it, I don't know. She named him Peaches."

Chiron scratched his beard. "I have not seen a demigod with the power to summon grain spirits in a very long time. You know what it means?"

My feet began to quake. "I have my suspicions. I'm trying to stay positive."

"She guided you out of the woods," Chiron noted. "Without her—"

"Yes," I said. "Don't remind me."

It occurred to me that I'd seen that keen look in Chiron's eyes before—when he'd assessed Achilles's sword technique and Ajax's skill with a spear. It was the look of a seasoned coach scouting new talent. I'd never dreamed the centaur would look at *me* that way, as if I had something to prove to him, as if my mettle were untested. I felt so…so *objectified.*

"Tell me," Chiron said, "what did you hear in the woods?"

I silently cursed my big mouth. I should not have asked whether the missing demigods had heard anything strange.

I decided it was fruitless to hold back now. Chiron was more perceptive than your average horse-man. I told him what I'd experienced in the forest, and afterward in my dream.

His hands curled into his lap blanket. The bottom of it rose higher above his red sequined pumps. He looked about as worried as it is possible for a man to look while wearing fishnet stockings.

"We will have to warn the campers to stay away from the forest," he decided. "I do not understand what is happening, but I still maintain it *must* be connected to Delphi, and your present…ah, situation. The Oracle must be liberated from the monster Python. We must find a way."

I translated that easily enough: *I* must find a way.

Chiron must have read my desolate expression.

"Come, come, old friend," he said. "You have done it before. Perhaps you are not a god now, but the first time you killed Python it was no challenge at all! Hundreds of storybooks have praised the way you easily slew your enemy."

"Yes," I muttered. "Hundreds of storybooks."

I recalled some of those stories: I had killed Python without breaking a sweat. I flew to the mouth of the cave, called him out, unleashed an arrow, and *BOOM!*—one dead giant snake monster. I became Lord of Delphi, and we all lived happily ever after.

How did storytellers get the idea that I vanquished Python so quickly?

All right…possibly it's because I told them so. Still, the truth was rather different. For centuries after our battle, I had bad dreams about my old foe.

Now I was almost grateful for my imperfect memory. I could not recollect all of the nightmarish details of my fight with Python, but I *did* know he had been

no pushover. I had needed all my godly strength, my divine powers, and the world's most deadly bow.

What chance would I have as a sixteen-year-old mortal with acne, hand-me-down clothes, and the nom de guerre Lester Papadopoulos? I was not going to charge off to Greece and get myself killed, thank you very much, especially not without my sun chariot or the ability to teleport. I'm sorry; gods do *not* fly commercial.

I tried to figure out how to explain this to Chiron in a calm, diplomatic way that did not involve stomping my feet or screaming. I was saved from the effort by the sound of a conch horn in the distance.

"That means dinner." The centaur forced a smile. "We will talk more later, eh? For now, let's celebrate your arrival."

12

Ode to a hot dog
With bug juice and tater chips
I got nothing, man

I WAS NOT IN THE MOOD TO CELEBRATE.

Especially sitting at a picnic table eating mortal food. With mortals.

The dining pavilion was pleasant enough. Even in winter, the camp's magical borders shielded us from the worst of the elements. Sitting outdoors in the warmth of the torches and braziers, I felt only slightly chilly. Long Island Sound glittered in the light of the moon. (Hello, Artemis. Don't bother to say hi.) On Half-Blood Hill, the Athena Parthenos glowed like the world's largest nightlight. Even the woods did not seem so creepy with the pine trees blanketed in soft silvery fog.

My dinner, however, was less than poetic. It consisted of hot dogs, potato chips, and a red liquid I was told was bug juice. I did not know why humans consumed bug juice, or from which type of bug it had been extracted, but it was the tastiest part of the meal, which was disconcerting.

I sat at the Apollo table with my children Austin, Kayla, and Will, plus Nico di Angelo. I could see no difference between my table and any of the other gods' tables. Mine should have been shinier and more elegant. It should have played music or recited poetry upon command. Instead it was just a slab of stone with benches on either side. I found the seating uncomfortable, though my offspring didn't seem to mind.

Austin and Kayla peppered me with questions about Olympus, the war with Gaea, and what it felt like to be a god and then a human. I knew they did not mean to be rude. As my children, they were inherently inclined to the utmost grace. However, their questions were painful reminders of my fallen status.

Besides, as the hours passed, I remembered less and less about my divine

life. It was alarming how fast my cosmically perfect neurons had deteriorated. Once, each memory had been like a high-definition audio file. Now those recordings were on wax cylinders. And believe me, I remember wax cylinders. They did not last long in the sun chariot.

Will and Nico sat shoulder to shoulder, bantering good-naturedly. They were so cute together it made me feel desolate. It jogged my memories of those few short golden months I'd shared with Hyacinthus before the jealousy, before the horrible accident…

"Nico," I said at last, "shouldn't you be sitting at the Hades table?"

He shrugged. "Technically, yes. But if I sit alone at my table, strange things happen. Cracks open in the floor. Zombies crawl out and start roaming around. It's a mood disorder. I can't control it. That's what I told Chiron."

"And is it true?" I asked.

Nico smiled thinly. "I have a note from my doctor."

Will raised his hand. "I'm his doctor."

"Chiron decided it wasn't worth arguing about," Nico said. "As long as I sit at a table with other people, like…oh, these guys for instance…the zombies stay away. Everybody's happier."

Will nodded serenely. "It's the strangest thing. Not that Nico would ever misuse his powers to get what he wants."

"Of course not," Nico agreed.

I glanced across the dining pavilion. As per camp tradition, Meg had been placed with the children of Hermes, since her godly parentage had not yet been determined. Meg didn't seem to mind. She was busy re-creating the Coney Island Hot Dog Eating Contest all by herself. The other two girls, Julia and Alice, watched her with a mixture of fascination and horror.

Across the table from her sat an older skinny boy with curly brown hair—Connor Stoll, I deduced, though I'd never been able to tell him apart from his older brother, Travis. Despite the darkness, Connor wore sunglasses, no doubt to protect his eyes from a repeat poking. I also noted that he wisely kept his hands away from Meg's mouth.

In the entire pavilion, I counted nineteen campers. Most sat alone at their respective tables—Sherman Yang for Ares; a girl I did not know for Aphrodite; another girl for Demeter. At the Nike table, two dark-haired young ladies who were obviously twins conversed over a war map. Chiron himself, again in full centaur form, stood at the head table, sipping his bug juice as he chatted with two satyrs, but their mood was subdued. The goat-men kept glancing at me, then eating their silverware, as satyrs tend to do when nervous. Half a dozen gorgeous dryads moved between the tables, offering food and drink, but I was so

preoccupied I couldn't fully appreciate their beauty. Even more tragic: I felt too embarrassed to flirt with them. What was *wrong* with me?

I studied the campers, hoping to spot some potential servants…I mean new friends. Gods always like to keep a few strong veteran demigods handy to throw into battle, send on dangerous quests, or pick the lint off our togas. Unfortunately, no one at dinner jumped out at me as a likely minion. I longed for a bigger pool of talent.

"Where are the…others?" I asked Will.

I wanted to say *the A-List*, but I thought that might be taken the wrong way.

Will took a bite of his pizza. "Were you looking for somebody in particular?"

"What about the ones who went on that quest with the boat?"

Will and Nico exchanged a look that might have meant, *Here we go*. I suppose they got asked a lot about the seven legendary demigods who had fought side by side with the gods against Gaea's giants. It pained me that I had not gotten to see those heroes again. After any major battle, I liked to get a group photo—along with exclusive rights to compose epic ballads about their exploits.

"Well," Nico started, "you saw Percy. He and Annabeth are spending their senior year in New York. Hazel and Frank are at Camp Jupiter doing the Twelfth Legion thing."

"Ah, yes." I tried to bring up a clear mental picture of Camp Jupiter, the Roman enclave near Berkeley, California, but the details were hazy. I could only remember my conversations with Octavian, the way he'd turned my head with his flattery and promises. That stupid boy…it was his fault I was here.

A voice whispered in the back of my mind. This time I thought it might be my conscience: *Who was the stupid boy? It wasn't Octavian.*

"Shut up," I murmured.

"What?" Nico asked.

"Nothing. Continue."

"Jason and Piper are spending the school year in Los Angeles with Piper's dad. They took Coach Hedge, Mellie, and Little Chuck with them."

"Uh-huh." I did not know those last three names, so I decided they probably weren't important. "And the seventh hero…Leo Valdez?"

Nico raised his eyebrows. "You remember his name?"

"Of course! He invented the Valdezinator. Oh, what a musical instrument! I barely had time to master its major scales before Zeus zapped me at the Parthenon. If anyone could help me, it would be Leo Valdez."

Nico's expression tightened with annoyance. "Well, Leo isn't here. He died. Then he came back to life. And if I see him again, I'll kill him."

Will elbowed him. "No, you won't." He turned to me. "During the fight with

Gaea, Leo and his bronze dragon, Festus, disappeared in a midair fiery explosion."

I shivered. After so many centuries driving the sun chariot, the term *midair fiery explosion* did not sit well with me.

I tried to remember the last time I'd seen Leo Valdez on Delos, when he'd traded the Valdezinator for information….

"He was looking for the physician's cure," I recalled, "the way to bring someone back from the dead. I suppose he planned all along to sacrifice himself?"

"Yep," Will said. "He got rid of Gaea in the explosion, but we all assumed he died too."

"Because he *did*," Nico said.

"Then, a few days later," Will continued, "this scroll came fluttering into camp on the wind…."

"I still have it." Nico rummaged through the pockets of his bomber jacket. "I look at it whenever I want to get angry."

He produced a thick parchment scroll. As soon as he spread it on the table, a flickering hologram appeared above the surface: Leo Valdez, looking impish as usual with his dark wispy hair, his mischievous grin, and his diminutive stature. (Of course, the hologram was only three inches tall, but even in real life Leo was not much more imposing.) His jeans, blue work shirt, and tool belt were speckled with machine oil.

"Hey, guys!" Leo spread his arms for a hug. "Sorry to leave you like that. Bad news: I died. Good news: I got better! I had to go rescue Calypso. We're both fine now. We're taking Festus to—" The image guttered like a flame in a strong breeze, disrupting Leo's voice. "Back as soon as—" Static. "Cook tacos when—" More static. "*¡Vaya con queso!* Love ya!" The image winked out.

"That's all we got," Nico complained. "And that was in August. We have no idea what he was planning, where he is now, or whether he's still safe. Jason and Piper spent most of September looking for him until Chiron finally insisted they go start their school year."

"Well," I said, "it sounds like Leo was planning to cook tacos. Perhaps that took longer than he anticipated. And *vaya con queso*…I believe he is admonishing us to *go with cheese*, which is always sound advice."

This did not seem to reassure Nico.

"I don't like being in the dark," he muttered.

An odd complaint for a child of Hades, but I understood what he meant. I, too, was curious to know the fate of Leo Valdez. Once upon a time, I could have divined his whereabouts as easily as you might check a Facebook timeline, but

now I could only stare at the sky and wonder when a small impish demigod might appear with a bronze dragon and a plate of tacos.

And if Calypso was involved…that complicated things. The sorceress and I had a rocky history, but even *I* had to admit she was beguiling. If she'd captured Leo's heart, it was entirely possible he had gotten sidetracked. Odysseus spent seven years with her before returning home.

Whatever the case, it seemed unlikely that Valdez would be back in time to help me. My quest to master the Valdezinator's arpeggios would have to wait.

Kayla and Austin had been very quiet, following our conversation with wonder and amazement. (My words have that effect on people.)

Now Kayla scooted toward me. "What did you guys talk about in the Big House? Chiron told you about the disappearances…?"

"Yes." I tried to avoid looking in the direction of the woods. "We discussed the situation."

"And?" Austin spread his fingers on the table. "What's going on?"

I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want them to see my fear.

I wished my head would stop pounding. On Olympus, headaches were so much easier to cure. Hephaestus simply split one's skull open and extracted whatever newborn god or goddess happened to be banging around in there. In the mortal world, my options were more limited.

"I need time to think about it," I said. "Perhaps in the morning I'll have some of my godly powers back."

Austin leaned forward. In the torchlight, his cornrows seemed to twist into new DNA patterns. "Is that how it works? Your strength comes back over time?"

"I—I think so." I tried to remember my years of servitude with Admetus and Laomedon, but I could barely conjure their names and faces. My contracting memory terrified me. It made each moment of the present balloon in size and importance, reminding me that time for mortals was limited.

"I have to get stronger," I decided. "I *must*."

Kayla squeezed my hand. Her archer's fingers were rough and calloused. "It's okay, Apollo…Dad. We'll help you."

Austin nodded. "Kayla's right. We're in this together. If anybody gives you trouble, Kayla will shoot them. Then I'll curse them so bad they'll be speaking in rhyming couplets for weeks."

My eyes watered. Not so long ago—like this morning, for instance—the idea of these young demigods being able to help me would have struck me as ridiculous. Now their kindness moved me more than a hundred sacrificial bulls. I couldn't recall the last time someone had cared about me enough to curse my enemies with rhyming couplets.

“Thank you,” I managed.

I could not add *my children.* It didn’t seem right. These demigods were my protectors and my family, but for the present I could not think of myself as their father. A father should do more—a father should give more to his children than he takes. I have to admit that this was a novel idea for me. It made me feel even worse than before.

“Hey…” Will patted my shoulder. “It’s not so bad. At least with everybody being on high alert, we might not have to do Harley’s obstacle course tomorrow.”

Kayla muttered an ancient Greek curse. If I had been a *proper* godly father, I would have washed her mouth out with olive oil.

“I forgot all about that,” she said. “They’ll *have* to cancel it, won’t they?”

I frowned. “What obstacle course? Chiron mentioned nothing about this.”

I wanted to object that my entire day had been an obstacle course. Surely they couldn’t expect me to do their camp activities as well. Before I could say as much, one of the satyrs blew a conch horn at the head table.

Chiron raised his arms for attention.

“Campers!” His voice filled the pavilion. He could be quite impressive when he wanted to be. “I have a few announcements, including news about tomorrow’s three-legged death race!”

13

Three-legged death race
Five terrible syllables
Oh, gods. Please not Meg

IT WAS ALL HARLEY'S FAULT.

After addressing the disappearance of Miranda Gardiner—"As a precautionary measure, please stay away from the woods until we know more"—Chiron called forward the young son of Hephaestus to explain how the three-legged death race would work. It quickly became apparent that Harley had masterminded the whole project. And, really, the idea was so horrifying, it could only have sprung from the mind of an eight-year-old boy.

I confess I lost track of the specifics after he explained the exploding chain-saw Frisbees.

"And they'll be like, ZOOM!" He bounced up and down with excitement. "And then BUZZ! And POW!" He pantomimed all sorts of chaos with his hands. "You have to be really quick or you'll die, and it's awesome!"

The other campers grumbled and shifted on their benches.

Chiron raised his hand for silence. "Now, I know there were problems last time," he said, "but fortunately our healers in the Apollo cabin were able to reattach Paolo's arms."

At a table in back, a muscular teen boy rose and began ranting in what I thought was Portuguese. He wore a white tank top over his dark chest, and I could see faint white scars around the tops of his biceps. Cursing rapidly, he pointed at Harley, the Apollo cabin, and pretty much everyone else.

"Ah, thank you, Paolo," Chiron said, clearly baffled. "I'm glad you are feeling better."

Austin leaned toward me and whispered, "Paolo understands English okay, but he only speaks Portuguese. At least, that's what he claims. None of us can

understand a word he says."

I didn't understand Portuguese either. Athena had been lecturing us for years about how Mount Olympus might migrate to Brazil someday, and we should all be prepared for the possibility. She'd even bought the gods Berlitz Portuguese DVDs for Saturnalia presents, but what does Athena know?

"Paolo seems agitated," I noted.

Will shrugged. "He's lucky he's a fast healer—son of Hebe, goddess of youth, and all that."

"You're staring," Nico noted.

"I am not," Will said. "I am merely assessing how well Paolo's arms are functioning after surgery."

"Hmph."

Paolo finally sat down. Chiron went through a long list of other injuries they had experienced during the first three-legged death race, all of which he hoped to avoid this time: second-degree burns, burst eardrums, a pulled groin, and two cases of chronic Irish step dancing.

The lone demigod at the Athena table raised his hand. "Chiron, just going to throw this out there….We've had three campers disappear. Is it really wise to be running a dangerous obstacle course?"

Chiron gave him a pained smile. "An excellent question, Malcolm, but this course will not take you into the woods, which we believe is the most hazardous area. The satyrs, dryads, and I will continue to investigate the disappearances. We will not rest until our missing campers are found. In the meantime, however, this three-legged race can foster important team-building skills. It also expands our understanding of the Labyrinth."

The word smacked me in the face like Ares's body odor. I turned to Austin. "The Labyrinth? As in *Daedalus's* Labyrinth?"

Austin nodded, his fingers worrying the ceramic camp beads around his neck. I had a sudden memory of his mother, Latricia—the way she used to fiddle with her cowry necklace when she lectured at Oberlin. Even *I* learned things from Latricia Lake's music theory class, though I had found her distractingly beautiful.

"During the war with Gaea," Austin said, "the maze reopened. We've been trying to map it ever since."

"That's impossible," I said. "Also insane. The Labyrinth is a malevolent sentient creation! It can't be mapped or trusted."

As usual, I could only draw on random bits and pieces of my memories, but I was fairly certain I spoke the truth. I remembered Daedalus. Back in the old days, the king of Crete had ordered him to build a maze to contain the monstrous

Minotaur. But, oh no, a simple maze wasn't *good* enough for a brilliant inventor like Daedalus. He had to make his Labyrinth self-aware and self-expanding. Over the centuries, it had honeycombed under the planet's surface like an invasive root system.

Stupid brilliant inventors.

"It's different now," Austin told me. "Since Daedalus died…I don't know. It's hard to describe. Doesn't feel so evil. Not quite as deadly."

"Oh, that's hugely reassuring. So of course you decided to do three-legged races through it."

Will coughed. "The other thing, Dad…Nobody wants to disappoint Harley."

I glanced at the head table. Chiron was still holding forth about the virtues of team building while Harley bounced up and down. I could see why the other campers might adopt the boy as their unofficial mascot. He was a cute little pipsqueak, even if he was scarily buff for an eight-year-old. His grin was infectious. His enthusiasm seemed to lift the mood of the entire group. Still, I recognized the mad gleam in his eyes. It was the same look his father, Hephaestus, got whenever he invented some automaton that would later go berserk and start destroying cities.

"Also keep in mind," Chiron was saying, "that none of the unfortunate disappearances has been linked to the Labyrinth. Remain with your partner and you should be safe…at least, as safe as one can be in a three-legged death race."

"Yeah," Harley said. "Nobody has even *died* yet." He sounded disappointed, as if he wanted us to try harder.

"In the face of a crisis," Chiron said, "it's important to stick to our regular activities. We must stay alert and in top condition. Our missing campers would expect no less from us. Now, as to the teams for the race, you will be allowed to choose your partner—"

There followed a sort of piranha attack of campers lunging toward each other to grab their preferred teammate. Before I could contemplate my options, Meg McCaffrey pointed at me from across the pavilion, her expression exactly like Uncle Sam's in the recruitment poster.

Of course, I thought. Why should my luck improve now?

Chiron struck his hoof against the floor. "All right, everyone, settle down! The race will be tomorrow afternoon. Thank you, Harley, for your hard work on the…um, various lethal surprises in store."

"BLAM!" Harley ran back to the Hephaestus table to join his older sister, Nyssa.

"This brings us to our other news," Chiron said. "As you may have heard, two special newcomers joined us today. First, please welcome the god Apollo!"

Normally this was my cue to stand up, spread my arms, and grin as radiant light shone around me. The adoring crowd would applaud and toss flowers and chocolate bonbons at my feet.

This time I received no applause—just nervous looks. I had a strange, uncharacteristic impulse to slide lower in my seat and pull my coat over my head. I restrained myself through heroic effort.

Chiron struggled to maintain his smile. "Now, I know this is unusual," he said, "but gods *do* become mortal from time to time. You should not be overly alarmed. Apollo's presence among us could be a good omen, a chance for us to…" He seemed to lose track of his own argument. "Ah…do something good. I'm sure the best course of action will become clear in time. For now, please make Apollo feel at home. Treat him as you would any other new camper."

At the Hermes table, Connor Stoll raised his hand. "Does that mean the Ares cabin should stick Apollo's head in a toilet?"

At the Ares table, Sherman Yang snorted. "We don't do that to everyone, Connor. Just the newbies who deserve it."

Sherman glanced at Meg, who was obliviously finishing her last hot dog. The wispy black whiskers at the sides of her mouth were now frosted with mustard.

Connor Stoll grinned back at Sherman—a conspiratorial look if ever I saw one. That's when I noticed the open backpack at Connor's feet. Peeking from the top was something that looked like a net.

The implication sank in: two boys whom Meg had humiliated, preparing for payback. I didn't have to be Nemesis to understand the allure of revenge. Still…I felt an odd desire to warn Meg.

I tried to catch her eye, but she remained focused on her dinner.

"Thank you, Sherman," Chiron continued. "It's good to know you won't be giving the god of archery a swirly. As for the rest of you, we will keep you posted on our guest's situation. I'm sending two of our finest satyrs, Millard and Herbert"—he gestured to the satyrs on his left—"to hand-deliver a message to Rachel Dare in New York. With any luck, she will be able to join us soon and help determine how we can best assist Apollo."

There was some grumbling about this. I caught the words *Oracle* and *prophecies*. At a nearby table, a girl muttered to herself in Italian: *The blind leading the blind.*

I glared at her, but the young lady was quite beautiful. She was perhaps two years older than I (mortally speaking), with dark pixie hair and devastatingly fierce almond eyes. I may have blushed.

I turned back to my tablemates. "Um…yes, satyrs. Why not send that other

satyr, the friend of Percy's?"

"Grover?" Nico asked. "He's in California. The whole Council of Cloven Elders is out there, meeting about the drought."

"Oh." My spirits fell. I remembered Grover as being quite resourceful, but if he was dealing with California's natural disasters, he was unlikely to be back anytime in the next decade.

"Finally," Chiron said, "we welcome a new demigod to camp—Meg McCaffrey!"

She wiped her mouth and stood.

Next to her, Alice Miyazawa said, "Stand up, Meg."

Julia Feingold laughed.

At the Ares table, Sherman Yang rose. "Now *this* one—this one deserves a special welcome. What do you think, Connor?"

Connor reached into his backpack. "I think maybe the canoe lake."

I started to say, "Meg—"

Then all Hades broke loose.

Sherman Yang strode toward Meg. Connor Stoll pulled out a golden net and threw it over her head. Meg yelped and tried to squirm free, while some of the campers chanted, "Dunk—her! Dunk—her!" Chiron did his best to shout them down: "Now, demigods, wait a moment!"

A guttural howl interrupted the proceedings. From the top of the colonnade, a blur of chubby flesh, leafy wings, and linen diaper hurtled downward and landed on Sherman Yang's back, knocking him face-first into the stone floor. Peaches the karpos stood and wailed, beating his chest. His eyes glowed green with anger. He launched himself at Connor Stoll, locked his plump legs around the demigod's neck, and began pulling out Connor's hair with his claws.

"Get it off!" Connor wailed, thrashing blindly around the pavilion. "Get it off!"

Slowly the other demigods overcame their shock. Several drew swords.

"C'è un karpos!" yelled the Italian girl.

"Kill it!" said Alice Miyazawa.

"No!" I cried.

Normally such a command from me would've initiated a prison lockdown situation, with all the mortals dropping to their bellies to await my further orders. Alas, now I was a mere mortal with a squeaky adolescent voice.

I watched in horror as my own daughter Kayla nocked an arrow in her bow.

"Peaches, get off him!" Meg screamed. She untangled herself from the net, threw it down, then ran toward Connor.

The karpos hopped off Connor's neck. He landed at Meg's feet, baring his

fangs and hissing at the other campers who had formed a loose semicircle with weapons drawn.

"Meg, get out of the way," said Nico di Angelo. "That thing is dangerous."

"No!" Meg's voice was shrill. "Don't kill him!"

Sherman Yang rolled over, groaning. His face looked worse than it probably was—a gash on the forehead can produce a shocking amount of blood—but the sight steeled the resolve of the other campers. Kayla drew her bow. Julia Feingold unsheathed a dagger.

"Wait!" I pleaded.

What happened next, a lesser mind could never have processed.

Julia charged. Kayla shot her arrow.

Meg thrust out her hands and faint gold light flashed between her fingers. Suddenly young McCaffrey was holding two swords—each a curved blade in the old Thracian style, *siccae* made from Imperial gold. I had not seen such weapons since the fall of the Rome. They seemed to have appeared from nowhere, but my long experience with magic items told me they must have been summoned from the crescent rings Meg always wore.

Both her blades whirled. Meg simultaneously sliced Kayla's arrow out of the air and disarmed Julia, sending her dagger skittering across the floor.

"What the Hades?" Connor demanded. His hair had been pulled out in chunks so he looked like an abused doll. "Who *is* this kid?"

Peaches crouched at Meg's side, snarling, as Meg fended off the confused and enraged demigods with her two swords.

My vision must have been better than the average mortal's, because I saw the glowing sign first—a light shining above Meg's head.

When I recognized the symbol, my heart turned to lead. I hated what I saw, but I thought I should point it out. "Look."

The others seemed confused. Then the glow became brighter: a holographic golden sickle with a few sheaves of wheat, rotating just above Meg McCaffrey.

A boy in the crowd gasped. "She's a communist!"

A girl who'd been sitting at Cabin Four's table gave him a disgusted sneer. "No, Damien, that's my *mom's* symbol." Her face went slack as the truth sank in. "Uh, which means…it's *her* mom's symbol."

My head spun. I did not want this knowledge. I did not want to serve a demigod with Meg's parentage. But now I understood the crescents on Meg's rings. They were not moons; they were sickle blades. As the only Olympian present, I felt I should make her title official.

"My friend is no longer unclaimed," I announced.

The other demigods knelt in respect, some more reluctantly than others.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I said, my voice as bitter as Chiron’s tea, “please give it up for Meg McCaffrey, daughter of Demeter.”

14

You've got to be kid—
Well, crud, what just happened there?
I ran out of syl—

NO ONE KNEW WHAT TO MAKE OF MEG.

I couldn't blame them.

The girl made even less sense to me now that I knew who her mother was.

I'd had my suspicions, yes, but I'd hoped to be proven wrong. Being right so much of the time was a terrible burden.

Why would I dread a child of Demeter?

Good question.

Over the past day, I had been doing my best to piece together my remembrances of the goddess. Once Demeter had been my favorite aunt. That first generation of gods could be a stuffy bunch (I'm looking at you, Hera, Hades, Dad), but Demeter had always been a kind and loving presence—except when she was destroying mankind through pestilence and famine, but everyone has their bad days.

Then I made the mistake of dating one of her daughters. I think her name was Chrysothemis, but you'll have to excuse me if I'm wrong. Even when I was a god, I had trouble remembering the names of all my exes. The young woman sang a harvest song at one of my Delphic festivals. Her voice was so beautiful, I fell in love. True, I fell in love with each year's winner and the runners-up, but what can I say? I'm a sucker for a melodious voice.

Demeter did not approve. Ever since her daughter Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, she'd been a little touchy about her children dating gods.

At any rate, she and I had words. We reduced a few mountains to rubble. We laid waste to a few city-states. You know how family arguments can get. Finally we settled into an uneasy truce, but ever since then I'd made a point to steer

clear of Demeter's children.

Now here I was—a servant to Meg McCaffrey, the most ragamuffin daughter of Demeter ever to swing a sickle.

I wondered who Meg's father had been to attract the attention of the goddess. Demeter rarely fell in love with mortals. Meg was unusually powerful, too. Most children of Demeter could do little more than make crops grow and keep bacterial fungi at bay. Dual-wielding golden blades and summoning karpoi—that was top-shelf stuff.

All of this went through my mind as Chiron dispersed the crowd, urging everyone to put away their weapons. Since head counselor Miranda Gardiner was missing, Chiron asked Billie Ng, the only other camper from Demeter, to escort Meg to Cabin Four. The two girls made a quick retreat, Peaches bouncing along excitedly behind them. Meg shot me a worried look.

Not sure what else to do, I gave her two thumbs-up. "See you tomorrow!"

She seemed less than encouraged as she disappeared in the darkness.

Will Solace tended to Sherman Yang's head injuries. Kayla and Austin stood over Connor, debating the need for a hair graft. This left me alone to make my way back to the Me cabin.

I lay on my sick cot in the middle of the room and stared at the ceiling beams. I thought again about what a depressingly simple, utterly mortal place this was. How did my children stand it? Why did they not keep a blazing altar, and decorate the walls with hammered gold reliefs celebrating my glory?

When I heard Will and the others coming back, I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. I could not face their questions or kindnesses, their attempts to make me feel at home when I clearly did not belong.

As they came in the door, they got quiet.

"Is he okay?" whispered Kayla.

Austin said, "Would you be, if you were him?"

A moment of silence.

"Try to get some sleep, guys," Will advised.

"This is crazy weird," Kayla said. "He looks so…human."

"We'll watch out for him," Austin said. "We're all he's got now."

I held back a sob. I couldn't bear their concern. Not being able to reassure them, or even disagree with them, made me feel very small.

A blanket was draped over me.

Will said, "Sleep well, Apollo."

Perhaps it was his persuasive voice, or the fact that I was more exhausted than I had been in centuries. Immediately, I drifted into unconsciousness.

Thank the remaining eleven Olympians, I had no dreams.

I woke in the morning feeling strangely refreshed. My chest no longer hurt. My nose no longer felt like a water balloon attached to my face. With the help of my offspring (*cabin mates*—I will call them cabin mates), I managed to master the arcane mysteries of the shower, the toilet, and the sink. The toothbrush was a shock. The last time I was mortal, there had been no such thing. And underarm deodorant—what a ghastly idea that I should need enchanted salve to keep my armpits from producing stench!

When I was done with my morning ablutions and dressed in clean clothes from the camp store—sneakers, jeans, an orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, and a comfy winter coat of flannel wool—I felt almost optimistic. Perhaps I could survive this human experience.

I perked up even more when I discovered bacon.

Oh, gods—bacon! I promised myself that once I achieved immortality again, I would assemble the Nine Muses and together we would create an ode, a hymnal to the power of bacon, which would move the heavens to tears and cause rapture across the universe.

Bacon is good.

Yes—that may be the title of the song: "Bacon Is Good."

Seating for breakfast was less formal than dinner. We filled our trays at a buffet line and were allowed to sit wherever we wished. I found this delightful. (Oh, what a sad commentary on my new mortal mind that I, who once dictated the course of nations, should get excited about open seating.) I took my tray and found Meg, who was sitting by herself on the edge of the pavilion's retaining wall, dangling her feet over the side and watching the waves at the beach.

"How are you?" I asked.

Meg nibbled on a waffle. "Yeah. Great."

"You are a powerful demigod, daughter of Demeter."

"Mm-hm."

If I could trust my understanding of human responses, Meg did not seem thrilled.

"Your cabin mate, Billie…Is she nice?"

"Sure. All good."

"And Peaches?"

She looked at me sideways. "Disappeared overnight. Guess he only shows up when I'm in danger."

"Well, that's an appropriate time for him to show up."

"Ap-pro-pri-ate." Meg touched a waffle square for each syllable. "Sherman Yang had to get seven stitches."

I glanced over at Sherman, who sat at a safe distance across the pavilion, glaring daggers at Meg. A nasty red zigzag ran down the side of his face.

"I wouldn't worry," I told Meg. "Ares's children like scars. Besides, Sherman wears the Frankenstein look rather well."

The corner of her mouth twitched, but her gaze remained far away. "Our cabin has a grass floor—like, *green* grass. There's a huge oak tree in the middle, holding up the ceiling."

"Is that bad?"

"I have allergies."

"Ah…" I tried to imagine the tree in her cabin. Once upon a time, Demeter had had a sacred grove of oaks. I remembered she'd gotten quite angry when a mortal prince tried to cut it down.

A sacred grove…

Suddenly the bacon in my stomach expanded, wrapping around my organs.

Meg gripped my arm. Her voice was a distant buzz. I only heard the last, most important word: "—Apollo?"

I stirred. "What?"

"You blanked out." She scowled. "I said your name six times."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Where did you go?"

I could not explain. I felt as if I'd been standing on the deck of a ship when an enormous, dark, and dangerous shape passed beneath the hull—a shape almost discernible, then simply gone.

"I—I don't know. Something about trees…."

"Trees," Meg said.

"It's probably nothing."

It *wasn't* nothing. I couldn't shake the image from my dreams: the crowned woman urging me to find the gates. That woman wasn't Demeter—at least, I didn't think so. But the idea of sacred trees stirred a memory within me… something very old, even by *my* standards.

I didn't want to talk about this with Meg, not until I'd had time to reflect. She had enough to worry about. Besides, after last night, my new young master made me more apprehensive than ever.

I glanced at the rings on her middle fingers. "So yesterday…those swords. And don't do that thing."

Meg's eyebrows furrowed. "What thing?"

"That thing where you shut down and refuse to talk. Your face turns to cement."

She gave me a furious pout. "It does not. I've got swords. I fight with them.

So what?”

“So it might have been nice to know that earlier, when we were in combat with plague spirits.”

“You said it yourself: those spirits couldn’t be killed.”

“You’re sidestepping.” I knew this because it was a tactic I had mastered centuries ago. “The style you fight in, with two curved blades, is the style of a *dimachaerus*, a gladiator from the late Roman Empire. Even back then, it was rare—possibly the most difficult fighting style to master, and one of the most deadly.”

Meg shrugged. It was an eloquent shrug, but it did not offer much in the way of explanation.

“Your swords are Imperial gold,” I said. “That would indicate *Roman* training, and mark you as a good prospect for Camp Jupiter. Yet your mother is Demeter, the goddess in her Greek form, not Ceres.”

“How do you know?”

“Aside from the fact that I was a god? Demeter claimed you here at Camp Half-Blood. That was no accident. Also, her older Greek form is much more powerful. You, Meg, are powerful.”

Her expression turned so guarded I expected Peaches to hurtle from the sky and start pulling out chunks of my hair.

“I never met my mom,” she said. “I didn’t know who she was.”

“Then where did you get the swords? Your father?”

Meg tore her waffle into tiny pieces. “No….My stepdad raised me. He gave me these rings.”

“Your stepfather. Your stepfather gave you rings that turn into Imperial golden swords. What sort of man—”

“A good man,” she snapped.

I noted the steel in Meg’s voice and let the subject rest. I sensed a great tragedy in her past. Also, I feared that if I pressed my questions, I might find those golden blades at my neck.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Mm-hm.” Meg tossed a piece of waffle into the air. Out of nowhere, one of the camp’s cleaning harpies swooped down like a two-hundred-pound kamikaze chicken, snatched up the food, and flew away.

Meg continued as if nothing had happened. “Let’s just get through today. We’ve got the race after lunch.”

A shiver ran down my neck. The last thing I wanted was to be strapped to Meg McCaffrey in the Labyrinth, but I managed to avoid screaming.

“Don’t worry about the race,” I said. “I have a plan for how to win it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Or rather, I *will* have a plan by this afternoon. All I need is a little time—”

Behind us, the conch horn blew.

“Morning boot camp!” Sherman Yang bellowed. “Let’s go, you special snowflakes! I want you all in tears by lunchtime!”

15

Practice makes perfect
Ha, ha, ha, I don't think so
Ignore my sobbing

I WISHED I HAD A DOCTOR'S NOTE. I wanted to be excused from PE.

Honestly, I will never understand you mortals. You try to maintain good physical shape with push-ups, sit-ups, five-mile runs, obstacle courses, and other hard work that involves sweating. All the while, you know it is a losing battle. Eventually your weak, limited-use bodies will deteriorate and fail, giving you wrinkles, sagging parts, and old-person breath.

It's horrific! If I want to change shape, or age, or gender, or species, I simply wish it to happen and—*ka-bam!*—I am a young, large, female three-toed sloth. No amount of push-ups will accomplish that. I simply don't see the logic in your constant struggles. Exercise is nothing more than a depressing reminder that one is not a god.

By the end of Sherman Yang's boot camp, I was gasping and drenched in sweat. My muscles felt like quivering columns of gelatinous dessert.

I did *not* feel like a special snowflake (though my mother, Leto, always assured me I was one), and I was sorely tempted to accuse Sherman of not treating me as such.

I grumbled about this to Will. I asked where the old head counselor of Ares had gone. Clarisse La Rue I could at least charm with my dazzling smile. Alas, Will reported she was attending the University of Arizona. Oh, why does college have to happen to perfectly good people?

After the torture, I staggered back to my cabin and took another shower.

Showers are good. Perhaps not as good as bacon, but good.

My second morning session was painful for a different reason. I was assigned to music lessons in the amphitheater with a satyr named Woodrow.

Woodrow seemed nervous to have me join his little class. Perhaps he had heard the legend about my skinning the satyr Marsyas alive after he challenged me to a music contest. (As I said, the flaying part was *totally* untrue, but rumors do have amazing staying power, especially when I may have been guilty of spreading them.)

Using his panpipe, Woodrow reviewed the minor scales. Austin had no problem with these, even though he was challenging himself by playing the violin, which was not his instrument. Valentina Diaz, a daughter of Aphrodite, did her best to throttle a clarinet, producing sounds like a basset hound whimpering in a thunderstorm. Damien White, son of Nemesis, lived up to his namesake by wreaking vengeance on an acoustic guitar. He played with such force that he broke the D string.

"You killed it!" said Chiara Benvenuti. She was the pretty Italian girl I'd noticed the night before—a child of Tyche, goddess of good fortune. "I needed to use that guitar!"

"Shut up, Lucky," Damien muttered. "In the *real* world, accidents happen. Strings snap sometimes."

Chiara unleashed some rapid-fire Italian that I decided not to translate.

"May I?" I reached for the guitar.

Damien reluctantly handed it over. I leaned toward the guitar case by Woodrow's feet. The satyr leaped several inches into the air.

Austin laughed. "Relax, Woodrow. He's just getting another string."

I'll admit I found the satyr's reaction gratifying. If I could still scare satyrs, perhaps there was hope for me reclaiming some of my former glory. From here I could work my way up to scaring farm animals, then demigods, monsters, and minor deities.

In a matter of seconds, I had replaced the string. It felt good to do something so familiar and simple. I adjusted the pitch, but stopped when I realized Valentina was sobbing.

"That was so beautiful!" She wiped a tear from her cheek. "What was that song?"

I blinked. "It's called tuning."

"Yeah, Valentina, control yourself," Damien chided, though his eyes were red. "It wasn't *that* beautiful."

"No." Chiara sniffled. "It wasn't."

Only Austin seemed unaffected. His eyes shone with what looked like pride, though I didn't understand why he would feel that way.

I played a C minor scale. The B string was flat. It's *always* the B string. Three thousand years since I invented the guitar (during a wild party with the

Hittites—long story), and I still couldn't figure out how to make a B string that stays in tune.

I ran through the other scales, delighted that I still remembered them.

"Now this is a Lydian progression," I said. "It starts on the fourth of the major scale. They say it's called Lydian after the old kingdom of Lydia, but actually, I named it for an old girlfriend of mine, Lydia. She was the fourth woman I dated that year, so…"

I looked up mid-arpeggio. Damien and Chiara were weeping in each other's arms, hitting each other weakly and cursing, "I hate you. I hate you."

Valentina lay on the amphitheater bench, silently shaking. Woodrow was pulling apart his panpipes.

"I'm worthless!" he sobbed. "Worthless!"

Even Austin had a tear in his eye. He gave me a thumbs-up.

I was thrilled that some of my old skill remained intact, but I imagined Chiron would be annoyed if I drove the entire music class into major depression.

I pulled the D string slightly sharp—a trick I used to use to keep my adoring fans from exploding in rapture at my concerts. (And I mean literally exploding. Some of those gigs at the Fillmore in the 1960s…well, I'll spare you the gruesome details.)

I strummed a chord that was intentionally out of tune. To me it sounded awful, but the campers stirred from their misery. They sat up, wiped their tears, and watched in fascination as I played a simple one-four-five progression.

"Yeah, man." Austin brought his violin to his chin and began to improvise. His resin bow danced across the strings. He and I locked eyes, and for a moment we were more than family. We became part of the music, communicating on a level only gods and musicians will ever understand.

Woodrow broke the spell.

"That's amazing," the satyr sobbed. "You two should be teaching the class. What was I thinking? Please don't flay me!"

"My dear satyr," I said, "I would never—"

Suddenly, my fingers spasmed. I dropped the guitar in surprise. The instrument tumbled down the stone steps of the amphitheater, clanging and *sproinging*.

Austin lowered his bow. "You okay?"

"I…yes, of course."

But I was not okay. For a few moments, I had experienced the bliss of my formerly easy talent. Yet, clearly, my new mortal fingers were not up to the task. My hand muscles were sore. Red lines dug into my finger pads where I had touched the fret board. I had overextended myself in other ways, too. My lungs

felt shriveled, drained of oxygen, even though I had done no singing.

"I'm…tired," I said, dismayed.

"Well, yeah." Valentina nodded. "The way you were playing was *unreal*!"

"It's okay, Apollo," Austin said. "You'll get stronger. When demigods use their powers, especially at first, they get tired quickly."

"But I'm not…"

I couldn't finish the sentence. I wasn't a demigod. I wasn't a god. I wasn't even myself. How could I ever play music again, knowing that I was a flawed instrument? Each note would bring me nothing but pain and exhaustion. My B string would *never* be in tune.

My misery must have shown on my face.

Damien White balled his fists. "Don't you worry, Apollo. It's not your fault. I'll make that stupid guitar pay for this!"

I didn't try to stop him as he marched down the stairs. Part of me took perverse satisfaction in the way he stomped the guitar until it was reduced to kindling and wires.

Chiara huffed. "*Idiota!* Now I'll never get my turn!"

Woodrow winced. "Well, um…thanks, everyone! Good class!"

Archery was an even bigger travesty.

If I ever become a god again (no, not if; *when*, *when*), my first act will be to wipe the memories of everyone who saw me embarrass myself in that class. I hit one bull's-eye. *One.* The grouping on my other shots was abysmal. Two arrows actually hit *outside* the black ring at a mere one hundred meters. I threw down my bow and wept with shame.

Kayla was our class instructor, but her patience and kindness only made me feel worse. She scooped up my bow and offered it back to me.

"Apollo," she said, "those shots were fantastic. A little more practice and—"

"I'm the god of archery!" I wailed. "I don't practice!"

Next to me, the daughters of Nike snickered.

They had the insufferably appropriate names Holly and Laurel Victor. They reminded me of the gorgeous, ferociously athletic African nymphs Athena used to hang out with at Lake Tritonis.

"Hey, ex-god," Holly said, nocking an arrow, "practice is the only way to improve." She scored a seven on the red ring, but she did not seem at all discouraged.

"For *you*, maybe," I said. "You're a mortal!"

Her sister, Laurel, snorted. "So are you now. Suck it up. Winners don't

complain.” She shot her arrow, which landed next to her sister’s but just inside the red ring. “That’s why I’m better than Holly. She’s always complaining.”

“Yeah, right,” Holly growled. “The only thing I complain about is how lame *you* are.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Laurel. “Let’s go. Right now. Best two out of three shots. The loser scrubs the toilets for a month.”

“You’re on!”

Just like that, they forgot about me. They definitely would’ve made excellent Tritonian nymphs.

Kayla took me by the arm and led me downrange. “Those two, I swear. We made them Nike co-counselors so they’d compete with each other. If we hadn’t, they would’ve taken over the camp by now and proclaimed a dictatorship.”

I suppose she was trying to cheer me up, but I was not consoled.

I stared at my fingers, now blistered from archery as well as sore from guitar. Impossible. Agonizing.

“I can’t do this, Kayla,” I muttered. “I’m too old to be sixteen again!”

Kayla cupped her hand over mine. Beneath the green shock of her hair, she had a ginger complexion—like cream painted over copper, the auburn sheen peeking through in the freckles of her face and arms. She reminded me very much of her father, the Canadian archery coach Darren Knowles.

I mean her *other* father. And, yes, of course it’s possible for a demigod child to spring from such a relationship. Why not? Zeus gave birth to Dionysus out of his own thigh. Athena once had a child who was created from a handkerchief. Why should such things surprise you? We gods are capable of infinite marvels.

Kayla took a deep breath, as if preparing for an important shot. “You can do it, Dad. You’re already good. *Very* good. You’ve just got to adjust your expectations. Be patient; be brave. You’ll get better.”

I was tempted to laugh. How could I get used to being merely *good*? Why would I strain myself to get better when before I had been *divine*?

“No,” I said bitterly. “No, it is too painful. I swear upon the River Styx—until I am a god again, I will not use a bow or a musical instrument!”

Go ahead and chide me. I know it was a foolish oath, spoken in a moment of misery and self-pity. And it was binding. An oath sworn on the River Styx can have terrible consequences if broken.

But I didn’t care. Zeus had cursed me with mortality. I was not going to pretend that everything was normal. I would not be Apollo until I was *really* Apollo. For now, I was just a stupid young man named Lester Papadopoulos. Maybe I would waste my time on skills I didn’t care about—like sword fighting or badminton—but I would *not* sully the memory of my once-perfect music and

archery.

Kayla stared at me in horror. “Dad, you don’t mean it.”

“I do!”

“Take it back! You can’t…” She glanced over my shoulder. “What is he doing?”

I followed her gaze.

Sherman Yang was walking slowly, trancelike, into the woods.

It would have been foolhardy to run after him, straight into the most dangerous part of camp.

So that’s exactly what Kayla and I did.

We almost didn’t make it. As soon as we reached the tree line, the forest darkened. The temperature dropped. The horizon stretched out as if bent through a magnifying glass.

A woman whispered in my ear. This time I knew the voice well. It had never stopped haunting me. *You did this to me. Come. Chase me again.*

Fear rolled through my stomach.

I imagined the branches turning to arms; the leaves undulated like green hands.

Daphne, I thought.

Even after so many centuries, the guilt was overwhelming. I could not look at a tree without thinking of her. Forests made me nervous. The life force of each tree seemed to bear down on me with righteous hatred, accusing me of so many crimes….I wanted to fall to my knees. I wanted to beg forgiveness. But this was not the time.

I couldn’t allow the woods to confuse me again. I would not let anyone else fall into its trap.

Kayla didn’t seem affected. I grabbed her hand to make sure we stayed together. We only had to go a few steps, but it felt like a boot camp run before we reached Sherman Yang.

“Sherman.” I grabbed his arm.

He tried to shake me off. Fortunately, he was sluggish and dazed, or I would have ended up with scars of my own. Kayla helped me turn him around.

His eyes twitched as if he were in some sort of half-conscious REM sleep. “No. Ellis. Got to find him. Miranda. My girl.”

I glanced at Kayla for explanation.

“Ellis is from the Ares cabin,” she said. “He’s one of the missing.”

“Yes, but Miranda, his girl?”

“Sherman and she started dating about a week ago.”

“Ah.”

Sherman struggled to free himself. “Find her.”

“Miranda is right over here, my friend,” I lied. “We’ll take you there.”

He stopped fighting. His eyes rolled until only the whites were visible. “Over…here?”

“Yes.”

“Ellis?”

“Yes, it’s me,” I said. “I’m Ellis.”

“I love you, man,” Sherman sobbed.

Still, it took all our strength to lead him out of the trees. I was reminded of the time Hephaestus and I had to wrestle the god Hypnos back to bed after he sleepwalked into Artemis’s private chambers on Mount Olympus. It’s a wonder any of us escaped without silver arrows pincushioning our posteriors.

We led Sherman to the archery range. Between one step and the next, he blinked his eyes and became his normal self. He noticed our hands on his arms and shook us off.

“What is this?” he demanded.

“You were walking into the woods,” I said.

He gave us his drill sergeant glower. “No, I wasn’t.”

Kayla reached for him, then obviously thought better about it. Archery would be difficult with broken fingers. “Sherman, you were in some kind of trance. You were muttering about Ellis and Miranda.”

Along Sherman’s cheek, his zigzag scar darkened to bronze. “I don’t remember that.”

“Although you didn’t mention the other missing camper,” I added helpfully. “Cecil?”

“Why would I mention Cecil?” Sherman growled. “I can’t stand the guy. And why should I believe you?”

“The woods had you,” I said. “The trees were pulling you in.”

Sherman studied the forest, but the trees looked normal again. The lengthening shadows and swaying green hands were gone.

“Look,” Sherman said, “I have a head injury, thanks to your annoying friend Meg. If I was acting strange, *that’s* why.”

Kayla frowned. “But—”

“Enough!” Sherman snapped. “If either of you mention this, I’ll make you eat your quivers. I don’t need people questioning my self-control. Besides, I’ve got the race to think about.”

He brushed past us.

“Sherman,” I called.

He turned, his fists clenched.

“The last thing you remember,” I said, “before you found yourself with us… what were you thinking about?”

For a microsecond, the dazed look passed across his face again. “About Miranda and Ellis…like you said. I was thinking…I wanted to know where they were.”

“You were asking a question, then.” A blanket of dread settled over me. “You wanted information.”

“I…”

At the dining pavilion, the conch horn blew.

Sherman’s expression hardened. “Doesn’t matter. Drop it. We’ve got lunch now. Then I’m going to destroy you all in the three-legged death race.”

As threats went, I had heard worse, but Sherman made it sound intimidating enough. He marched off toward the pavilion.

Kayla turned to me. “What just happened?”

“I think I understand now,” I said. “I know why those campers went missing.”

16

Tied to McCaffrey
We might end up in Lima
Harley is evil

NOTE TO SELF: trying to reveal important information just before a three-legged death race is not a good idea.

No one would listen to me.

Despite last night's grumbling and complaining, the campers were now buzzing with excitement. They spent their lunch hour frantically cleaning weapons, lacing armor straps, and whispering among one another to form secret alliances. Many tried to convince Harley, the course architect, to share hints about the best strategies.

Harley loved the attention. By the end of lunch, his table was piled high with offerings (read: bribes)—chocolate bars, peanut butter cups, gummy bears, and Hot Wheels. Harley would have made an excellent god. He took the gifts, mumbled a few pleasantries, but told his worshippers nothing helpful.

I tried to speak with Chiron about the dangers of the woods, but he was so frantic with last-minute race preparations that I almost got trampled just standing near him. He trotted nervously around the pavilion with a team of satyr and dryad referees in tow, comparing maps and issuing orders.

"The teams will be almost impossible to track," he murmured, his face buried in a Labyrinth schematic. "And we don't have any coverage in grid D."

"But, Chiron," I said, "if I could just—"

"The test group this morning ended up in Peru," he told the satyrs. "We can't have that happen again."

"About the woods," I said.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Apollo. I understand you are concerned—"

"The woods are actually speaking," I said. "You remember the old—"

A dryad ran up to Chiron with her dress billowing smoke. “The flares are exploding!”

“Ye gods!” Chiron said. “Those were for emergencies!”

He galloped over my feet, followed by his mob of assistants.

And so it went. When one is a god, the world hangs on your every word. When one is sixteen…not so much.

I tried to talk to Harley, hoping he might postpone the race, but the boy brushed me off with a simple “Nah.”

As was so often the case with Hephaestus’s children, Harley was tinkering with some mechanical device, moving the springs and gears around. I didn’t really care what it was, but I asked Harley about it, hoping to win the boy’s goodwill.

“It’s a beacon,” he said, adjusting a knob. “For lost people.”

“You mean the teams in the Labyrinth?”

“No. You guys are on your own. This is for Leo.”

“Leo Valdez.”

Harley squinted at the device. “Sometimes, if you can’t find your way back, a beacon can help. Just got to find the right frequency.”

“And…how long have you been working on this?”

“Since he disappeared. Now I gotta concentrate. Can’t stop the race.” He turned his back on me and walked off.

I stared after him in amazement. For six months, the boy had been working on a beacon to help his missing brother Leo. I wondered if anyone would work so hard to bring me back home to Olympus. I very much doubted it.

I stood forlornly in a corner of the pavilion and ate a sandwich. I watched the sun wane in the winter sky and I thought about my chariot, my poor horses stuck in their stables with no one to take them out for a ride.

Of course, even without my help, other forces would keep the cosmos chugging along. Many different belief systems powered the revolution of the planets and stars. Wolves would still chase Sol across the sky. Ra would continue his daily journey in his sun barque. Tonatiuh would keep running on his surplus blood from human sacrifices back in the Aztec days. And that other thing—science—would still generate gravity and quantum physics and whatever.

Nevertheless, I felt like I wasn’t doing my part, standing around waiting for a three-legged race.

Even Kayla and Austin were too distracted to talk with me. Kayla had told Austin about our experience rescuing Sherman Yang from the woods, but Austin was more interested in swabbing out his saxophone.

“We can tell Chiron at dinner,” he mumbled with a reed in his mouth.

“Nobody’s going to listen until the race is over, and we’ll be staying out of the woods anyway. Besides, if I can play the right tune in the Labyrinth…” He got a gleam in his eyes. “Ooh. Come here, Kayla. I have an idea.”

He steered her away and left me alone again.

I understood Austin’s enthusiasm, of course. His saxophone skills were so formidable, I was certain he would become the foremost jazz instrumentalist of his generation, and if you think it’s easy to get half a million views on YouTube playing jazz saxophone, think again. Still, his musical career was not going to happen if the force in the woods destroyed us all.

As a last resort (a *very* last resort), I sought out Meg McCaffrey.

I spotted her at one of the braziers, talking with Julia Feingold and Alice Miyazawa. Or rather, the Hermes girls were talking while Meg devoured a cheeseburger. I marveled that Demeter—the queen of grains, fruits, and vegetables—could have a daughter who was such an unrepentant carnivore.

Then again, Persephone was the same way. You’ll hear stories about the goddess of springtime being all sweetness and daffodils and nibbling on pomegranate seeds, but I’m telling you, that girl was frightening when she attacked a mound of pork spareribs.

I strode over to Meg’s side. The Hermes girls stepped back as if I were a snake handler. I found this reaction pleasing.

“Hello,” I said. “What are we talking about?”

Meg wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “These two wanna know our plans for the race.”

“I’m sure they do.” I plucked a small magnetic listening device from Meg’s coat sleeve and tossed it back to Alice.

Alice smiled sheepishly. “Can’t blame us for trying.”

“No, of course not,” I said. “In the same spirit, I hope you won’t mind what I did to your shoes. Have a good race!”

The girls shuffled off nervously, checking the soles of their sneakers.

Meg looked at me with something resembling respect. “What did you do to them?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Half the trick to being a god is knowing how to bluff.”

She snorted. “So what’s our top secret plan? Wait. Let me guess. You don’t have one.”

“You’re learning. Honestly, I meant to come up with one, but I got sidetracked. We have a problem.”

“Sure do.” From her coat pocket, she pulled two loops of bronze, like resistance bands of braided metal. “You’ve seen these? They wrap around our legs. Once they’re on, they *stay* on until the race is over. No way to get them off.

I *hate* restraints."

"I agree." I was tempted to add *especially when I am tied to a small child named Meg*, but my natural diplomacy won out. "However, I was referring to a different problem."

I told her about the incident during archery, when Sherman had almost been lured into the forest.

Meg removed her cat-eye glasses. Without the lenses, her dark irises looked softer and warmer, like tiny plots of planting soil. "You think something in the woods is calling to people?"

"I think something in the woods is *answering* people. In ancient times, there was an Oracle—"

"Yeah, you told me. Delphi."

"No. Another Oracle, even older than Delphi. It involved trees. An entire grove of talking trees."

"Talking trees." Meg's mouth twitched. "What was that Oracle called?"

"I—I can't remember." I ground my teeth. "I *should* know. I should be able to tell you instantly! But the information…It's almost as if it is eluding me on purpose."

"That happens sometimes," Meg said. "You'll think of it."

"But it *never* happens to me! Stupid human brain! At any rate, I believe this grove is somewhere in those woods. I don't know how or why. But the whispering voices…they are from this hidden Oracle. The sacred trees are trying to speak prophecies, reaching out to those with burning questions, luring them in."

Meg put her glasses back on. "You know that sounds crazy, right?"

I steadied my breathing. I had to remind myself that I was no longer a god. I had to put up with insults from mortals without being able to blast them to ashes.

"Just be on guard," I said.

"But the race doesn't even go through the woods."

"Nevertheless…we are not safe. If you can summon your friend Peaches, I would welcome his company."

"I told you, he sort of pops up when he feels like it. I can't—"

Chiron blew a hunting horn so loudly my vision doubled. Another pledge to myself: once I became a god again, I would descend upon this camp and take away all their horns.

"Demigods!" said the centaur. "Tie your legs together and follow me to your starting positions!"

We gathered in a meadow about a hundred yards from the Big House. Making it *that* far without a single life-threatening incident was a minor miracle. With my left leg bound to Meg's right, I felt the way I used to in Leto's womb just before my sister and I were born. And, yes, I remember that quite well. Artemis was always shoving me aside, elbowing me in the ribs and generally being a womb hog.

I said a silent prayer that if I got through this race alive, I would sacrifice a bull to myself and possibly even build myself a new temple. I am a sucker for bulls and temples.

The satyrs directed us to spread out across the meadow.

"Where is the starting line?" Holly Victor demanded, shoving her shoulder ahead of her sister's. "I want to be the closest."

"*I* want to be closest," Laurel corrected. "You can be *second* closest."

"Not to worry!" Woodrow the satyr sounded very worried. "We'll explain everything in a moment. As soon as I, um, know what to explain."

Will Solace sighed. He was, of course, tied to Nico. He propped his elbow on Nico's shoulder as if the son of Hades were a convenient shelf. "I miss Grover. He used to organize things like this so well."

"I'd settle for Coach Hedge." Nico pushed Will's arm off. "Besides, don't talk about Grover too loudly. Juniper's right over there."

He pointed to one of the dryads—a pretty girl dressed in pale green.

"Grover's girlfriend," Will explained to me. "She misses him. A lot."

"Okay, everybody!" Woodrow shouted. "Spread out a little bit more, please! We want you to have plenty of room so, you know, if you die, you won't take down all the other teams too!"

Will sighed. "I am *so* excited."

He and Nico loped off. Julia and Alice from the Hermes cabin checked their shoes one more time, then glared at me. Connor Stoll was paired with Paolo Montes, the Brazilian son of Hebe, and neither of them seemed happy about it.

Perhaps Connor looked glum because his mangled scalp was covered in so much medicinal salve his head looked like it had been coughed up by a cat. Or perhaps he just missed his brother Travis.

As soon as Artemis and I were born, we couldn't *wait* to get some distance between us. We staked out our own territories and that was that. But I would've given anything to see her just then. I was sure Zeus had threatened her with severe punishment if she tried to help me during my time as a mortal, but she could have at least sent me a care package from Olympus—a decent toga, some magical acne cream, and maybe a dozen cranberry ambrosia scones from the Scylla Cafe. They made *excellent* scones.

I scanned the other teams. Kayla and Austin were bound together, looking like a deadly pair of street performers with her bow and his saxophone. Chiara, the cute girl from Tyche, was stuck with her nemesis, Damien White, son of… well, Nemesis. Billie Ng from Demeter was leg-tied with Valentina Diaz, who was hastily checking her makeup in the reflective surface of Billie's silver coat. Valentina didn't seem to notice that two twigs were sprouting from her hair like tiny deer antlers.

I decided the biggest threat would be Malcolm Pace. You can never be too careful with children of Athena. Surprisingly, though, he'd paired himself with Sherman Yang. That didn't seem like a natural partnership, unless Malcolm had some sort of plan. Those Athena children *always* had a plan. It rarely included letting me win.

The only demigods not participating were Harley and Nyssa, who had set up the course.

Once the satyrs judged we had all spread out sufficiently and our leg bindings had been double-checked, Harley clapped for our attention.

"Okay!" He bounced up and down eagerly, reminding me of the Roman children who used to cheer for executions at the Colosseum. "Here's the deal. Each team has to find three golden apples, then get back to this meadow alive."

Grumbling broke out among the demigods.

"Golden apples," I said. "I *hate* golden apples. They bring nothing but trouble."

Meg shrugged. "I like apples."

I remembered the rotten one she'd used to break Cade's nose in the alley. I wondered if perhaps she could use golden apples with the same deadly skill. Perhaps we stood a chance after all.

Laurel Victor raised her hand. "You mean the first team back wins?"

"*Any* team that gets back alive wins!" Harley said.

"That's ridiculous!" Holly said. "There can only be one winner. First team back wins!"

Harley shrugged. "Have it your way. *My* only rules are stay alive, and don't kill each other."

"O quê?" Paolo started complaining so loudly in Portuguese that Connor had to cover his left ear.

"Now, now!" Chiron called. His saddlebags were overflowing with extra first-aid kits and emergency flares. "We won't need any *help* making this a dangerous challenge. Let's have a good clean three-legged death race. And another thing, campers, given the problems our test group had this morning, please repeat after me: *Do not end up in Peru*."

“Do not end up in Peru,” everyone chanted.

Sherman Yang cracked his knuckles. “So where *is* the starting line?”

“There is no starting line,” Harley said with glee. “You’re all starting from right where you are.”

The campers looked around in confusion. Suddenly the meadow shook. Dark lines etched across the grass, forming a giant green checkerboard.

“Have fun!” Harley squealed.

The ground opened beneath our feet, and we fell into the Labyrinth.

17

Bowling balls of death
Rolling toward my enemies
I'll trade you problems

AT LEAST WE DID NOT LAND IN PERU.

My feet hit stone, jarring my ankles. We stumbled against a wall, but Meg provided me with a convenient cushion.

We found ourselves in a dark tunnel braced with oaken beams. The hole we'd fallen through was gone, replaced by an earthen ceiling. I saw no sign of the other teams, but from somewhere above I could vaguely hear Harley chanting, "Go! Go! Go!"

"When I get my powers back," I said, "I will turn Harley into a constellation called the Ankle Biter. At least constellations are silent."

Meg pointed down the corridor. "Look."

As my eyes adjusted, I realized the tunnel's dim light emanated from a glowing piece of fruit about thirty meters away.

"A golden apple," I said.

Meg lurched forward, pulling me with her.

"Wait!" I said. "There might be traps!"

As if to illustrate my point, Connor and Paolo emerged from the darkness at the other end of the corridor. Paolo scooped up the golden apple and shouted, *"BRASIL!"*

Connor grinned at us. "Too slow, suckers!"

The ceiling opened above them, showering them with iron orbs the size of cantaloupes.

Connor yelped, "Run!"

He and Paolo executed an awkward one-eighty and hobbled away, hotly pursued by a rolling herd of cannonballs with sparking fuses.

The sounds quickly faded. Without the glowing apple, we were left in total darkness.

"Great." Meg's voice echoed. "Now what?"

"I suggest we go the other direction."

That was easier said than done. Being blind seemed to bother Meg more than it did me. Thanks to my mortal body, I already felt crippled and deprived of my senses. Besides, I often relied on more than sight. Music required keen hearing. Archery required a sensitive touch and the ability to feel the direction of the wind. (Okay, sight was also helpful, but you get the idea.)

We shuffled ahead, our arms extended in front of us. I listened for suspicious clicks, snaps, or creaks that might indicate an incoming flock of explosions, but I suspected that if I *did* hear any warning signs, it would be too late.

Eventually Meg and I learned to walk with our bound legs in synchronicity. It wasn't easy. I had a flawless sense of rhythm. Meg was always a quarter beat slow or fast, which kept us veering left or right and running into walls.

We lumbered along for what might have been minutes or days. In the Labyrinth, time was deceptive.

I remembered what Austin had told me about the Labyrinth feeling different since the death of its creator. I was beginning to understand what he meant. The air seemed fresher, as if the maze hadn't been chewing up quite so many bodies. The walls didn't radiate the same malignant heat. As far as I could tell, they weren't oozing blood or slime, either, which was a definite improvement. In the old days, you couldn't take a step inside Daedalus's Labyrinth without sensing its all-consuming desire: *I will destroy your mind and your body.* Now the atmosphere was sleepier, the message not quite as virulent: *Hey, if you die in here, that's cool.*

"I never liked Daedalus," I muttered. "That old rascal didn't know when to stop. He always had to have the latest tech, the most recent updates. I *told* him not to make his maze self-aware. 'A.I. will destroy us, man,' I said. But noooo. He *had* to give the Labyrinth a malevolent consciousness."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Meg said. "But maybe you shouldn't bad-mouth the maze while we're inside it."

Once, I stopped when I heard the sound of Austin's saxophone. It was faint, echoing through so many corridors I couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. Then it was gone. I hoped he and Kayla had found their three apples and escaped safely.

Finally, Meg and I reached a Y in the corridor. I could tell this from the flow of the air and the temperature differential against my face.

"Why'd we stop?" Meg asked.

“Shh.” I listened intently.

From the right-hand corridor came a faint whining sound like a table saw. The left-hand corridor was quiet, but it exuded a faint odor that was unpleasantly familiar…not sulfur, exactly, but a vaporous mix of minerals from deep in the earth.

“I don’t hear anything,” Meg complained.

“A sawing noise to the right,” I told her. “To the left, a bad smell.”

“I choose the bad smell.”

“Of course you do.”

Meg blew me one of her trademark raspberries, then hobbled to the left, pulling me along with her.

The bronze bands around my leg began to chafe. I could feel Meg’s pulse through her femoral artery, messing up my rhythm. Whenever I get nervous (which doesn’t happen often), I like to hum a song to calm myself—usually Ravel’s *Boléro* or the ancient Greek “Song of Seikilos.” But with Meg’s pulse throwing me off, the only tune I could conjure was the “Chicken Dance.” That was not soothing.

We edged forward. The smell of volcanic fumes intensified. My pulse lost its perfect rhythm. My heart knocked against my chest with every *cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck* of the “Chicken Dance.” I feared I knew where we were. I told myself it wasn’t possible. We couldn’t have walked halfway around the world. But this was the Labyrinth. Down here, distance was meaningless. The maze knew how to exploit its victims’ weaknesses. Worse: it had a vicious sense of humor.

“I see light!” Meg said.

She was right. The absolute darkness had changed to murky gray. Up ahead, the tunnel ended, joining with a narrow, lengthwise cavern like a volcanic vent. It looked as if a colossal claw had slashed across the corridor and left a wound in the earth. I had seen creatures with claws that big down in Tartarus. I did not fancy seeing them again.

“We should turn around,” I said.

“That’s stupid,” Meg said. “Don’t you see the golden glow? There’s an apple in there.”

All I saw were swirling plumes of ash and gas. “The glow could be lava,” I said. “Or radiation. Or eyes. Glowing eyes are *never* good.”

“It’s an apple,” Meg insisted. “I can smell apple.”

“Oh, *now* you develop keen senses?”

Meg forged onward, giving me little choice but to go with. For a small girl, she was quite good at throwing her weight around. At the end of the tunnel, we

found ourselves on a narrow ledge. The cliff wall opposite was only ten feet away, but the crevasse seemed to plunge downward forever. Perhaps a hundred feet above us, the jagged vent opened into a bigger chamber.

A painfully large ice cube seemed to be working its way down my throat. I had never seen this place from below, but I knew exactly where we were. We stood at the *omphalus*—the navel of the ancient world.

"You're shaking," Meg said.

I tried to cover her mouth with my hand, but she promptly bit it.

"Don't touch me," she snarled.

"*Please* be quiet."

"Why?"

"Because right above us—" My voice cracked. "Delphi. The chamber of the Oracle."

Meg's nose quivered like a rabbit's. "That's impossible."

"No, it's not," I whispered. "And if this is Delphi, that means…"

From overhead came a hiss so loud, it sounded as if the entire ocean had hit a frying pan and evaporated into a massive steam cloud. The ledge shook. Pebbles rained down. Above, a monstrous body slid across the crevasse, completely covering the opening. The smell of molting snakeskin seared my nostrils.

"Python." My voice was now an octave higher than Meg's. "He is here."

18

The Beast is calling
Tell him I'm not here. Let's hide
Where? In garbage. Natch

HAD I EVER BEEN SO TERRIFIED?

Perhaps when Typhon raged across the earth, scattering the gods before him. Perhaps when Gaea unleashed her giants to tear down Olympus. Or perhaps when I accidentally saw Ares naked in the gymnasium. That had been enough to turn my hair white for a century.

But I had been a god all of those times. Now I was a weak, tiny mortal cowering in the darkness. I could only pray my old enemy would not sense my presence. For once in my long glorious life, I wanted to be invisible.

Oh, why had the Labyrinth brought me here?

As soon as I thought this, I chided myself: Of *course* it would bring me where I least wanted to be. Austin had been wrong about the maze. It was still evil, designed to kill. It was just a little subtler about its homicides now.

Meg seemed oblivious to our danger. Even with an immortal monster a hundred feet above us, she had the nerve to stay on task. She elbowed me and pointed to a tiny ledge on the opposite wall, where a golden apple glowed cheerfully.

Had Harley *placed* it there? I couldn't imagine. More likely the boy had simply rolled golden apples down various corridors, trusting that they would find the most dangerous spots to roost. I was really starting to dislike that boy.

Meg whispered, "Easy jump."

I gave her a look that under different circumstances would've incinerated her. "Too dangerous."

"Apple," she hissed.

"Monster!" I hissed back.

“One.”

“No!”

“Two.”

“No!”

“Three.” She jumped.

Which meant that I also jumped. We made the ledge, though our heels sent a spray of rubble into the chasm. Only my natural coordination and grace saved us from toppling backward to our deaths. Meg snatched up the apple.

Above us, the monster rumbled, “Who approaches?”

His voice…Gods above, I remembered that voice—deep and gruff, as if he breathed xenon rather than air. For all I knew, he did. Python could certainly *produce* his share of unhealthy gasses.

The monster shifted his weight. More gravel spilled into the crevasse.

I stood absolutely still, pressed against the cold face of the rock. My eardrums pulsed with every beat of my heart. I wished I could stop Meg from breathing. I wished I could stop the rhinestones on her eyeglasses from glittering.

Python had heard us. I prayed to all the gods that the monster would decide the noise was nothing. All he had to do was breathe down into the crevasse and he would kill us. There was no escaping his poisonous belch—not from this distance, not for a mortal.

Then, from the cavern above, came another voice, smaller and much closer to human. “Hello, my reptilian friend.”

I nearly wept with relief. I had no idea who this newcomer was, or why he had been so foolish as to announce his presence to Python, but I always appreciated it when humans sacrificed themselves to save me. Common courtesy was not dead after all!

Python’s harsh laugh shook my teeth. “Well, I was wondering if you would make the trip, Monsieur Beast.”

“Don’t call me that,” the man snapped. “And the commute was quite easy now that the Labyrinth is back in service.”

“I’m so pleased.” Python’s tone was dry as basalt.

I couldn’t tell much about the man’s voice, muffled as it was by several tons of reptile flesh, but he sounded calmer and more in control than I would have been talking to Python. I had heard the term *Beast* used to describe someone before, but as usual, my mortal brainpower failed me.

If only I’d been able to retain just the *important* information! Instead, I could tell you what I had for dessert the first time I dined with King Minos. (Spice cake.) I could tell you what color *chitons* the sons of Niobe were wearing when I

slew them. (A very unflattering shade of orange.) But I couldn't remember something as basic as whether this Beast was a wrestler, a movie star, or a politician. Possibly all three?

Next to me, in the glow of the apple, Meg seemed to have turned to bronze. Her eyes were wide with fear. A little late for that, but at least she was quiet. If I didn't know better, I might have thought the man's voice terrified her more than the monster's.

"So, Python," the man continued, "any prophetic words to share with me?"

"In time…my lord."

The last words were spoken with amusement, but I'm not sure anyone else would've recognized it. Aside from myself, few had been on the receiving end of Python's sarcasm and lived to tell the tale.

"I need more than your assurances," the man said. "Before we proceed, we must have *all* the Oracles under our control."

All the Oracles. Those words almost sent me off the cliff, but somehow I retained my balance.

"In time," Python said, "as we agreed. We have come this far by biding our time, yes? You did not reveal your hand when the Titans stormed New York. I did not march to war with Gaea's giants. We both realized the time for victory was not yet right. You must remain patient for a while longer."

"Don't lecture me, snake. While you slumbered, I built an empire. I have spent centuries—"

"Yes, yes." The monster exhaled, causing a tremor along the cliff face. "And if you ever want your empire to come out of the shadows, you need to deliver on *your* side of the bargain first. When will you destroy Apollo?"

I stifled a yelp. I should not have been surprised that they were talking about me. For millennia, I had assumed that *everyone* talked about me all the time. I was so interesting they simply couldn't help it. But this business about destroying me—I didn't like that.

Meg looked more terrified than I'd ever seen her. I wanted to think she was worried for my sake, but I had a feeling she was equally concerned about herself. Again, those mixed-up demigod priorities.

The man stepped closer to the chasm. His voice became clearer and louder. "Don't worry about Apollo. He is exactly where I need him to be. He will serve our purpose, and once he is no longer useful…"

He did not bother finishing the statement. I was afraid it did not end with *we will give him a nice present and send him on his way.* With a chill, I recognized the voice from my dream. It was the nasal sneer of the man in the purple suit. I also had a feeling I'd heard him sing before, years and years ago, but that didn't

make sense….Why would I suffer through a concert given by an ugly purple-suited man who called himself the Beast? I was not even a *fan* of death metal polka!

Python shifted his bulk, showering us with more rubble. “And how exactly will you convince him to serve our purpose?”

The Beast chuckled. “I have well-placed help within the camp who will steer Apollo toward us. Also, I have upped the stakes. Apollo will have no choice. He and the girl will open the gates.”

A whiff of Python vapor floated across my nose—enough to make me dizzy, hopefully not enough to kill me.

“I trust you are right,” said the monster. “Your judgment in the past has been…questionable. I wonder if you have chosen the right tools for this job. Have you learned from your past mistakes?”

The man snarled so deeply I could almost believe he was turning into a beast. I’d seen that happen enough times. Next to me, Meg whimpered.

“Listen here, you overgrown reptile,” the man said, “my only mistake was not burning my enemies fast enough, often enough. I assure you, I am stronger than ever. My organization is everywhere. My colleagues stand ready. When we control all four Oracles, we will control fate itself!”

“And what a glorious day that will be.” Python’s voice was jagged with contempt. “But beforehand, you must destroy the *fifth* Oracle, yes? That is the only one I *cannot* control. You must set flame to the grove of—”

“Dodona,” I said.

The word leaped unbidden from my mouth and echoed through the chasm. Of all the stupid times to retrieve a piece of information, of all the stupid times to say it aloud…oh, the body of Lester Papadopoulos was a terrible place to live.

Above us, the conversation stopped.

Meg hissed at me, “You idiot.”

The Beast said, “What was that sound?”

Rather than answer, *Oh, that’s just us,* we did something even more foolish. One of us, Meg or me—personally, I blame her—must have slipped on a pebble. We toppled off the ledge and fell into the sulfurous clouds below.

SQUISH.

The Labyrinth most definitely had a sense of humor. Instead of allowing us to smash into a rock floor and die, the maze dropped us into a mound of wet, full garbage bags.

If you’re keeping score, that was the *second* time since becoming mortal that

I had crash-landed in garbage, which was two times more than any god should endure.

We tumbled down the pile in a frenzy of three-legged flailing. We landed at the bottom, covered with muck, but, miraculously, still alive.

Meg sat up, glazed in a layer of coffee grounds.

I pulled a banana peel off my head and flicked it aside. “Is there some reason you keep landing us in trash heaps?”

“Me? You’re the one who lost his balance!” Meg wiped her face without much luck. In her other hand, she clutched the golden apple with trembling fingers.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” she snapped.

Clearly that was not true. She looked as if she’d just gone through Hades’s haunted house. (Pro tip: DO NOT.) Her face was pallid. She had bit her lip so hard, her teeth were pink with blood. I also detected the faint smell of urine, meaning one of us had gotten scared enough to lose bladder control, and I was seventy-five percent sure it wasn’t me.

“That man upstairs,” I said. “You recognized his voice?”

“Shut up. That’s an order!”

I attempted to reply. To my consternation, I found that I couldn’t. My voice had heeded Meg’s command all on its own, which did not bode well. I decided to file away my questions about the Beast for later.

I scanned our surroundings. Garbage chutes lined the walls on all four sides of the dismal little basement. As I watched, another bag of refuse slid down the right-hand chute and hit the pile. The smell was so strong, it could have burned paint off the walls, if the gray cinder blocks had been painted. Still, it was better than smelling the fumes of Python. The only visible exit was a metal door marked with a biohazard sign.

“Where are we?” Meg asked.

I glared at her, waiting.

“You can talk now,” she added.

“This is going to shock you,” I said, “but it appears we are in a garbage room.”

“But where?”

“Could be anywhere. The Labyrinth intersects with subterranean places all around the world.”

“Like Delphi.” Meg glowered at me as if our little Greek excursion had been my fault and not…well, only indirectly my fault.

“That was unexpected,” I agreed. “We need to speak with Chiron.”

“What is Dodona?”

“I—I’ll explain it all later.” I didn’t want Meg to shut me up again. I also didn’t want to talk about Dodona while trapped in the Labyrinth. My skin was crawling, and I didn’t think it was just because I was covered in sticky soda syrup. “First, we need to get out of here.”

Meg glanced behind me. “Well, it wasn’t a total waste.” She reached into the garbage and pulled out a second piece of glowing fruit. “Only one more apple to go.”

“Perfect.” The last thing I cared about was finishing Harley’s ridiculous race, but at least it would get Meg moving. “Now, why don’t we see what fabulous biohazards await us behind that door?”

19

They have gone missing?
No, no, no, no, no, no, no
No, et cetera

THE ONLY BIOHAZARDS we encountered were vegan cupcakes.

After navigating several torchlit corridors, we burst into a crowded modern bakery that, according to the menu board, had the dubious name THE LEVEL TEN VEGAN. Our garbage/volcanic gas stench quickly dispersed the customers, driving most toward the exit, and causing many non-dairy gluten-free baked goods to be trampled. We ducked behind the counter, charged through the kitchen doors, and found ourselves in a subterranean amphitheater that looked centuries old.

Tiers of stone seats ringed a sandy pit about the right size for a gladiator fight. Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of thick iron chains. I wondered what ghastly spectacles might have been staged here, but we didn't stay very long.

We limped out the opposite side, back into the Labyrinth's twisting corridors.

By this point, we had perfected the art of three-legged running. Whenever I started to tire, I imagined Python behind us, spewing poisonous gas.

At last we turned a corner, and Meg shouted, "There!"

In the middle of the corridor sat a third golden apple.

This time I was too exhausted to care about traps. We loped forward until Meg scooped up the fruit.

In front of us, the ceiling lowered, forming a ramp. Fresh air filled my lungs. We climbed to the top, but instead of feeling elated, my insides turned as cold as the garbage juice on my skin. We were back in the woods.

"Not here," I muttered. "Gods, no."

Meg hopped us in a full circle. "Maybe it's a different forest."

But it wasn't. I could feel the resentful stare of the trees, the horizon stretching out in all directions. Voices began to whisper, waking to our presence.

"Hurry," I said.

As if on cue, the bands around our legs sprang loose. We ran.

Even with her arms full of apples, Meg was faster. She veered between trees, zigzagging left and right as if following a course only she could see. My legs ached and my chest burned, but I didn't dare fall behind.

Up ahead, flickering points of light resolved into torches. At last we burst out of the woods, right into a crowd of campers and satyrs.

Chiron galloped over. "Thank the gods!"

"You're welcome," I gasped, mostly out of habit. "Chiron…we have to talk."

In the torchlight, the centaur's face seemed carved from shadow. "Yes, we do, my friend. But first, I fear one more team is still missing…your children, Kayla and Austin."

Chiron forced us to take showers and change clothes. Otherwise I would have plunged straight back into the woods.

By the time I was done, Kayla and Austin still had not returned.

Chiron had sent search parties of dryads into the forest, on the assumption that they would be safe in their home territory, but he adamantly refused to let demigods join the hunt.

"We cannot risk anyone else," he said. "Kayla, Austin, and—and the other missing…They would not want that."

Five campers had now disappeared. I harbored no illusions that Kayla and Austin would return on their own. The Beast's words still echoed in my ears: *I have upped the stakes. Apollo will have no choice.*

Somehow he had targeted my children. He was inviting me to look for them, and to find the gates of this hidden Oracle. There was still so much I did not understand—how the ancient grove of Dodona had relocated here, what sort of "gates" it might have, why the Beast thought I could open them, and how he'd snared Austin and Kayla. But there was one thing I did know: the Beast was right. I had no choice. I had to find my children…my *friends*.

I would have ignored Chiron's warning and run into the forest except for Will's panicked shout, "Apollo, I need you!"

At the far end of the field, he had set up an impromptu hospital where half a dozen campers lay injured on stretchers. He was frantically tending to Paolo Montes while Nico held down the screaming patient.

I ran to Will's side and winced at what I saw.

Paolo had managed to get one of his legs sawed off.

"I got it reattached," Will told me, his voice shaky with exhaustion. His scrubs were speckled with blood. "I need somebody to keep him stable."

I pointed to the woods. "But—"

"I know!" Will snapped. "Don't you think I want to be out there searching too? We're shorthanded for healers. There's some salve and nectar in that pack. Go!"

I was stunned by his tone. I realized he was just as concerned about Kayla and Austin as I was. The only difference: Will knew his duty. He had to heal the injured first. And he needed my help.

"Y-yes," I said. "Yes, of course."

I grabbed the supply pack and took charge of Paolo, who had conveniently passed out from the pain.

Will changed his surgical gloves and glared at the woods. "We *will* find them. We *have* to."

Nico di Angelo gave him a canteen. "Drink. Right now, this is where you need to be."

I could tell the son of Hades was angry too. Around his feet, the grass steamed and withered.

Will sighed. "You're right. But that doesn't make me feel better. I have to set Valentina's broken arm now. You want to assist?"

"Sounds gruesome," Nico said. "Let's go."

I tended to Paolo Montes until I was sure he was out of danger, then asked two satyrs to carry his stretcher to the Hebe cabin.

I did what I could to nurse the others. Chiara had a mild concussion. Billie Ng had come down with a case of Irish step dancing. Holly and Laurel needed pieces of shrapnel removed from their backs, thanks to a close encounter with an exploding chain-saw Frisbee.

The Victor twins had placed in first, predictably, but they also demanded to know which of them had the *most* pieces of shrapnel extracted, so they could have bragging rights. I told them to be quiet or I would never allow them to wear laurel wreaths again. (As the guy who held the patent on laurel wreaths, that was my prerogative.)

I found my mortal healing skills were passable. Will Solace far outshone me, but that didn't bother me as much as my failures with archery and music had. I suppose I was used to being second in healing. My son Asclepius had become the god of medicine by the time he was fifteen, and I couldn't have been happier for him. It left me time for my other interests. Besides, it's every god's dream to have a child who grows up to be a doctor.

As I was washing up from the shrapnel extraction, Harley shuffled over, fiddling with his beacon device. His eyes were puffy from crying.

"It's my fault," he muttered. "I got them lost. I…I'm sorry."

He was shaking. I realized the little boy was terrified of what I might do.

For the past two days, I had yearned to cause fear in mortals again. My stomach had boiled with resentment and bitterness. I wanted someone to blame for my predicament, for the disappearances, for my own powerlessness to fix things.

Looking at Harley, my anger evaporated. I felt hollow, silly, ashamed of myself. Yes, me, Apollo…ashamed. Truly, it was an event so unprecedented, it should have ripped apart the cosmos.

"It's all right," I told him.

He sniffled. "The racecourse went into the woods. It shouldn't have done that. They got lost and…and—"

"Harley"—I placed my hands over his—"may I see your beacon?"

He blinked the tears away. I guess he was afraid I might smash his gadget, but he let me take it.

"I'm not an inventor," I said, turning the gears as gently as possible. "I don't have your father's skills. But I *do* know music. I believe automatons prefer a frequency of E at 329.6 hertz. It resonates best with Celestial bronze. If you adjust your signal—"

"Festus might hear it?" Harley's eyes widened. "Really?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Just as you could not have known what the Labyrinth would do today. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying. Never stop inventing, son of Hephaestus."

I gave him back his beacon. For a count of three, Harley stared at me in disbelief. Then he hugged me so hard he nearly rebroke my ribs, and he dashed away.

I tended to the last of the injured while the harpies cleaned the area, picking up bandages, torn clothing, and damaged weapons. They gathered the golden apples in a basket and promised to bake us some lovely glowing apple turnovers for breakfast.

At Chiron's urging, the remaining campers dispersed back to their cabins. He promised them we would determine what to do in the morning, but I had no intention of waiting.

As soon as we were alone, I turned to Chiron and Meg.

"I'm going after Kayla and Austin," I told them. "You can join me or not."

Chiron's expression tightened. "My friend, you're exhausted and unprepared. Go back to your cabin. It will serve no purpose—"

“No.” I waved him off, as I once might have done when I was a god. The gesture probably looked petulant coming from a sixteen-year-old nobody, but I didn’t care. “I have to do this.”

The centaur lowered his head. “I should have listened to you before the race. You tried to warn me. What—what did you discover?”

The question stopped my momentum like a seat belt.

After rescuing Sherman Yang, after listening to Python in the Labyrinth, I had felt certain I knew the answers. I had remembered the name *Dodona*, the stories about talking trees…

Now my mind was once again a bowl of fuzzy mortal soup. I couldn’t recall what I’d been so excited about, or what I had intended to do about it.

Perhaps exhaustion and stress had taken their toll. Or maybe Zeus was manipulating my brain—allowing me tantalizing glimpses of the truth, then snatching them away, turning my aha! moments into huh? moments.

I howled in frustration. “I don’t remember!”

Meg and Chiron exchanged nervous glances.

“You’re not going,” Meg told me firmly.

“*What?* You can’t—”

“That’s an order,” she said. “No going into the woods until I say so.”

The command sent a shudder from the base of my skull to my heels.

I dug my fingernails into my palms. “Meg McCaffrey, if my children die because you wouldn’t let me—”

“Like Chiron said, you’d just get yourself killed. We’ll wait for daylight.”

I thought how satisfying it would be to drop Meg from the sun chariot at high noon. Then again, some small rational part of me realized she might be right. I was in no condition to launch a one-man rescue operation. That just made me angrier.

Chiron’s tail swished from side to side. “Well, then…I will see you both in the morning. We *will* find a solution. I promise you that.”

He gave me one last look, as if worried I might start running in circles and baying at the moon. Then he trotted back toward the Big House.

I scowled at Meg. “I’m staying out here tonight, in case Kayla and Austin come back. Unless you want to forbid me from doing that, *too*.”

She only shrugged. Even her *shrugs* were annoying.

I stormed off to the Me cabin and grabbed a few supplies: a flashlight, two blankets, a canteen of water. As an afterthought, I took a few books from Will Solace’s bookshelf. No surprise, he kept reference materials about me to share with new campers. I thought perhaps the books might help jog my memories. Failing that, they’d make good tinder for a fire.

When I returned to the edge of the woods, Meg was still there.

I hadn't expected her to keep vigil with me. Being Meg, she had apparently decided it would be the best way to irritate me.

She sat next to me on my blanket and began eating a golden apple, which she had hidden in her coat. Winter mist drifted through the trees. The night breeze rippled through the grass, making patterns like waves.

Under different circumstances, I might have written a poem about it. In my present state of mind, I could only have managed a funeral dirge, and I did not want to think about death.

I tried to stay mad at Meg, but I couldn't manage it. I supposed she'd had my best interests at heart…or at least, she wasn't ready to see her new godly servant get himself killed.

She didn't try to console me. She asked me no questions. She amused herself by picking up small rocks and tossing them into the woods. That, I didn't mind. I happily would've given her a catapult if I had one.

As the night wore on, I read about myself in Will's books.

Normally this would have been a happy task. I am, after all, a fascinating subject. This time, however, I gained no satisfaction from my glorious exploits. They all seemed like exaggerations, lies, and…well, myths. Unfortunately, I found a chapter about Oracles. Those few pages stirred my memory, confirming my worst suspicions.

I was too angry to be terrified. I stared at the woods and dared the whispering voices to disturb me. I thought, *Come on, then. Take me, too.* The trees remained silent. Kayla and Austin did not return.

Toward dawn, it started to snow. Only then did Meg speak. "We should go inside."

"And abandon them?"

"Don't be stupid." Snow salted the hood of her winter coat. Her face was hidden except for the tip of her nose and the glint of rhinestones on her glasses. "You'll freeze out here."

I noticed she didn't complain about the cold herself. I wondered if she even felt uncomfortable, or if the power of Demeter kept her safe through the winter like a leafless tree or a dormant seed in the earth.

"They were my children." It hurt me to use the past tense, but Kayla and Austin felt irretrievably lost. "I should've done more to protect them. I should have anticipated that my enemies would target them to hurt me."

Meg chucked another rock at the trees. "You've had a lot of children. You take the blame every time one of them gets in trouble?"

The answer was no. Over the millennia, I had barely managed to remember

my children's names. If I sent them an occasional birthday card or a magic flute, I felt really good about myself. Sometimes I wouldn't realize one of them had died until decades later. During the French Revolution, I got worried about my boy Louis XIV, the Sun King, then went down to check on him and found out he had died seventy-five years earlier.

Now, though, I had a mortal conscience. My sense of guilt seemed to have expanded as my life span contracted. I couldn't explain that to Meg. She would never understand. She'd probably just throw a rock at me.

"It's my fault Python retook Delphi," I said. "If I had killed him the moment he reappeared, while I was still a god, he would never have become so powerful. He would never have made an alliance with this…this *Beast.*"

Meg lowered her face.

"You know him," I guessed. "In the Labyrinth, when you heard the Beast's voice, you were terrified."

I was worried she might order me to shut up again. Instead, she silently traced the crescents on her gold rings.

"Meg, he wants to *destroy* me," I said. "Somehow, he's behind these disappearances. The more we understand about this man—"

"He lives in New York."

I waited. It was difficult to glean much information from the top of Meg's hood.

"All right," I said. "That narrows it down to eight and a half million people. What else?"

Meg picked at the calluses on her fingers. "If you're a demigod on the streets, you hear about the Beast. He takes people like me."

A snowflake melted on the back of my neck. "Takes people…why?"

"To train," Meg said. "To use like…servants, soldiers. I don't know."

"And you've met him."

"Please don't ask me—"

"Meg."

"He killed my dad."

Her words were quiet, but they hit me harder than a rock in the face. "Meg, I—I'm sorry. How…?"

"I refused to work for him," she said. "My dad tried to…" She closed her fists. "I was really small. I hardly remember it. I got away. Otherwise, the Beast would've killed me, too. My stepdad took me in. He was good to me. You asked why he trained me to fight? Why he gave me the rings? He wanted me to be safe, to be able to protect myself."

"From the Beast."

Her hood dipped. “Being a good demigod, training hard…that’s the only way to keep the Beast away. Now you know.”

In fact, I had more questions than ever, but I sensed that Meg was in no mood for further sharing. I remembered her expression as we stood on that ledge under the chamber of Delphi—her look of absolute terror when she recognized the Beast’s voice. Not all monsters were three-ton reptiles with poisonous breath. Many wore human faces.

I peered into the woods. Somewhere in there, five demigods were being used as bait, including two of my children. The Beast wanted me to search for them, and I would. But I would *not* let him use me.

I have well-placed help within the camp, the Beast had said.

That bothered me.

I knew from experience that any demigod could be turned against Olympus. I had been at the banquet table when Tantalus tried to poison the gods by feeding us his chopped-up son in a stew. I’d watched as King Mithridates sided with the Persians and massacred every Roman in Anatolia. I’d witnessed Queen Clytemnestra turn homicidal, killing her husband Agamemnon just because he made one little human sacrifice to me. Demigods are an unpredictable bunch.

I glanced at Meg. I wondered if she could be lying to me—if she was some sort of spy. It seemed unlikely. She was too contrary, impetuous, and annoying to be an effective mole. Besides, she was technically my master. She could order me to do almost any task and I would have to obey. If she was out to destroy me, I was already as good as dead.

Perhaps Damien White…a son of Nemesis was a natural choice for backstabbing duty. Or Connor Stoll, Alice, or Julia…a child of Hermes had recently betrayed the gods by working for Kronos. They might do so again. Maybe that pretty Chiara, daughter of Tyche, was in league with the Beast. Children of luck were natural gamblers. The truth was, I had no idea.

The sky turned from black to gray. I became aware of a distant *thump, thump, thump*—a quick, relentless pulse that got louder and louder. At first, I feared it might be the blood in my head. Could human brains explode from too many worrisome thoughts? Then I realized the noise was mechanical, coming from the west. It was the distinctly modern sound of rotor blades cutting the air.

Meg lifted her head. “Is that a helicopter?”

I got to my feet.

The machine appeared—a dark red Bell 412 cutting north along the coastline. (Riding the skies as often as I do, I know my flying machines.) Painted on the helicopter’s side was a bright green logo with the letters D.E.

Despite my misery, a small bit of hope kindled inside me. The satyrs Millard

and Herbert must have succeeded in delivering their message.

"That," I told Meg, "is Rachel Elizabeth Dare. Let's go see what the Oracle of Delphi has to say."

20

Don't paint over gods
If you're redecorating
That's, like, common sense

RACHEL ELIZABETH DARE was one of my favorite mortals. As soon as she'd become the Oracle two summers ago, she'd brought new vigor and excitement to the job.

Of course, the previous Oracle had been a withered corpse, so perhaps the bar was low. Regardless, I was elated as the Dare Enterprises helicopter descended just beyond the eastern hills, outside the camp's boundary. I wondered what Rachel had told her father—a fabulously wealthy real estate magnate—to convince him she needed to borrow a helicopter. I knew Rachel could be quite convincing.

I jogged across the valley with Meg in tow. I could already imagine the way Rachel would look as she came over the summit: her frizzy red hair, her vivacious smile, her paint-spattered blouse, and jeans covered with doodles. I needed her humor, wisdom, and resilience. The Oracle would cheer us all up. Most importantly, she would cheer *me* up.

I was not prepared for the reality. (Which again, was a stunning surprise. Normally, reality prepares itself for *me*.)

Rachel met us on the hill near the entrance to her cave. Only later would I realize Chiron's two satyr messengers were not with her, and I would wonder what had happened to them.

Miss Dare looked thinner and older—less like a high school girl and more like a young farmer's wife from ancient times, weathered from hard work and gaunt from shortage of food. Her red hair had lost its vibrancy. It framed her face in a curtain of dark copper. Her freckles had faded to watermarks. Her green eyes did not sparkle. And she was wearing a dress—a white cotton frock with a

white shawl, and a patina-green jacket. Rachel *never* wore dresses.

"Rachel?" I didn't trust myself to say any more. She was not the same person.

Then I remembered that I wasn't either.

She studied my new mortal form. Her shoulders slumped. "So it's true."

From below us came the voices of other campers. No doubt woken by the sound of the helicopter, they were emerging from their cabins and gathering at the base of the hill. None tried to climb toward us, though. Perhaps they sensed that all was not right.

The helicopter rose from behind Half-Blood Hill. It veered toward Long Island Sound, passing so close to the Athena Parthenos that I thought its landing skids might clip the goddess's winged helmet.

I turned to Meg. "Would you tell the others that Rachel needs some space? Fetch Chiron. He should come up. The rest should wait."

It wasn't like Meg to take orders from me. I half expected her to kick me. Instead, she glanced nervously at Rachel, turned, and trudged down the hill.

"A friend of yours?" Rachel asked.

"Long story."

"Yes," she said. "I have a story like that, too."

"Shall we talk in your cave?"

Rachel pursed her lips. "You won't like it. But yes, that's probably the safest place."

The cave was not as cozy as I remembered.

The sofas were overturned. The coffee table had a broken leg. The floor was strewn with easels and canvases. Even Rachel's tripod stool, the throne of prophecy itself, lay on its side on a pile of paint-splattered drop cloths.

Most disturbing was the state of the walls. Ever since taking up residence, Rachel had been painting them, like her cave-dwelling ancestors of old. She had spent hours on elaborate murals of events from the past, images from the future she'd seen in prophecies, favorite quotes from books and music, and abstract designs so good they would have given M. C. Escher vertigo. The art made the cave feel like a mixture of art studio, psychedelic hangout, and graffiti-covered highway underpass. I loved it.

But most of the images had been blotted out with a sloppy coat of white paint. Nearby, a roller was stuck in an encrusted tray. Clearly Rachel had defaced her own work months ago and hadn't been back since.

She waved listlessly at the wreckage. "I got frustrated."

“Your art…” I gaped at the field of white. “There was a lovely portrait of me—right there.”

I get offended whenever art is damaged, especially if that art features me.

Rachel looked ashamed. “I—I thought a blank canvas might help me think.” Her tone made it obvious that the whitewashing had accomplished nothing. I could have told her as much.

The two of us did our best to clean up. We hauled the sofas back into place to form a sitting area. Rachel left the tripod stool where it lay.

A few minutes later, Meg returned. Chiron followed in full centaur form, ducking his head to fit through the entrance. They found us sitting at the wobbly coffee table like civilized cave people, sharing lukewarm Arizona tea and stale crackers from the Oracle’s larder.

“Rachel.” Chiron sighed with relief. “Where are Millard and Herbert?”

She bowed her head. “They arrived at my house badly wounded. They…they didn’t make it.”

Perhaps it was the morning light behind him, but I fancied I could see new gray whiskers growing in Chiron’s beard. The centaur trotted over and lowered himself to the ground, folding his legs underneath himself. Meg joined me on the couch.

Rachel leaned forward and steepled her fingers, as she did when she spoke a prophecy. I half hoped the spirit of Delphi would possess her, but there was no smoke, no hissing, no raspy voice of divine possession. It was a bit disappointing.

“You first,” she told us. “Tell me what’s been going on here.”

We brought her up to speed on the disappearances and my misadventures with Meg. I explained about the three-legged race and our side trip to Delphi.

Chiron blanched. “I did not know this. You went to Delphi?”

Rachel stared at me in disbelief. “*The* Delphi. You saw Python and you…”

I got the feeling she wanted to say *and you didn’t kill him?* But she restrained herself.

I felt like standing with my face against the wall. Perhaps Rachel could blot me out with white paint. Disappearing would’ve been less painful than facing my failures.

“At present,” I said, “I cannot defeat Python. I am much too weak. And… well, the Catch-88.”

Chiron sipped his Arizona tea. “Apollo means that we cannot send a quest without a prophecy, and we cannot get a prophecy without an Oracle.”

Rachel stared at her overturned tripod stool. “And this man…the Beast. What do you know about him?”

“Not much.” I explained what I had seen in my dream, and what Meg and I had overheard in the Labyrinth. “The Beast apparently has a reputation for snatching up young demigods in New York. Meg says…” I faltered when I saw her expression, clearly cautioning me to stay away from her personal history. “Um, she’s had some experience with the Beast.”

Chiron raised his brows. “Can you tell us anything that might help, dear?”

Meg sank into the sofa’s cushions. “I’ve crossed paths with him. He’s—he’s scary. The memory is blurry.”

“Blurry,” Chiron repeated.

Meg became very interested in the cracker crumbs on her dress.

Rachel gave me a quizzical look. I shook my head, trying my best to impart a warning: *Trauma. Don’t ask. Might get attacked by a peach baby.*

Rachel seemed to get the message. “That’s all right, Meg,” she said. “I have some information that may help.”

She fished her phone from her coat pocket. “Don’t touch this. You guys have probably figured it out, but phones are going even more haywire than usual around demigods. I’m not technically one of you, and even *I* can’t place calls. I was able to take a couple of pictures, though.” She turned the screen toward us. “Chiron, you recognize this place?”

The nighttime shot showed the upper floors of a glass residential tower. Judging from the background, it was somewhere in downtown Manhattan.

“That is the building you described last summer,” Chiron said, “where you parleyed with the Romans.”

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “Something didn’t feel right about that place. I got to thinking…how did the Romans take over such prime Manhattan real estate on such short notice? Who owns it? I tried to contact Reyna, to see if she could tell me anything, but—”

“Communications problems?” Chiron guessed.

“Exactly. I even sent physical mail to Camp Jupiter’s drop box in Berkeley. No response. So I asked my dad’s real estate lawyers to do some digging.”

Meg peeked over the top of her glasses. “Your dad has lawyers? And a helicopter?”

“Several helicopters.” Rachel sighed. “He’s annoying. Anyway, that building is owned by a shell corporation, which is owned by another shell corporation, blah, blah, blah. The mother company is something called Triumvirate Holdings.”

I felt a trickle like white paint rolling down my back. “*Triumvirate*…”

Meg made a sour face. “What does that mean?”

“A triumvirate is a ruling council of three,” I said. “At least, that’s what it

meant in ancient Rome."

"Which is interesting," Rachel said, "because of this next shot." She tapped her screen. The new photo zoomed in on the building's penthouse terrace, where three shadowy figures stood talking together—men in business suits, illuminated only by the light from inside the apartment. I couldn't see their faces.

"These are the owners of Triumvirate Holdings," Rachel said. "Just getting this *one* picture wasn't easy." She blew a frizzy strand of hair out of her face. "I've spent the last two months investigating them, and I don't even know their names. I don't know where they live or where they came from. But I can tell you they own so much property and have so much money, they make my dad's company look like a kid's lemonade stand."

I stared at the picture of the three shadowy figures. I could almost imagine that the one on the left was the Beast. His slouching posture and the over-large shape of his head reminded me of the man in purple from my dream.

"The Beast said that his organization was everywhere," I recalled. "He mentioned he had colleagues."

Chiron's tail flicked, sending a paintbrush skidding across the cave floor. "Adult demigods? I can't imagine they would be Greek, but perhaps Roman? If they helped Octavian with his war—"

"Oh, they helped," Rachel said. "I found a paper trail—not much, but you remember those siege weapons Octavian built to destroy Camp Half-Blood?"

"No," said Meg.

I would have ignored her, but Rachel was a more generous soul.

She smiled patiently. "Sorry, Meg. You seem so at home here, I forgot you were new. Basically, the Roman demigods attacked this camp with giant catapulty things called onagers. It was all a big misunderstanding. Anyway, the weapons were paid for by Triumvirate Holdings."

Chiron frowned. "That is not good."

"I found something even more disturbing," Rachel continued. "You remember before that, during the Titan War, Luke Castellan mentioned he had backers in the mortal world? They had enough money to buy a cruise ship, helicopters, weapons. They even hired mortal mercenaries."

"Don't remember that, either," Meg said.

I rolled my eyes. "Meg, we can't stop and explain every major war to you! Luke Castellan was a child of Hermes. He betrayed this camp and allied himself with the Titans. They attacked New York. Big battle. I saved the day. Et cetera."

Chiron coughed. "At any rate, I do remember Luke claiming that he had lots of supporters. We never found out exactly who they were."

"Now we know," Rachel said. "That cruise ship, the *Princess Andromeda*,

was property of Triumvirate Holdings."

A cold sense of unease gripped me. I felt I should know something about this, but my mortal brain was betraying me again. I was more certain than ever that Zeus was toying with me, keeping my vision and memory limited. I remembered some assurances Octavian had given me, though—how easy it would be to win his little war, to raise new temples to me, how much support he had.

Rachel's phone screen went dark—much like my brain—but the grainy photo remained burned into my retinas.

"These men…" I picked up an empty tube of burnt sienna paint. "I'm afraid they are not modern demigods."

Rachel frowned. "You think they're ancient demigods who came through the Doors of Death—like Medea, or Midas? The thing is, Triumvirate Holdings has been around since way before Gaea started to wake. Decades, at least."

"Centuries," I said. "The Beast said that he'd been building his empire for centuries."

The cave became so silent, I imagined the hiss of Python, the soft exhale of fumes from deep in the earth. I wished we had some background music to drown it out…jazz or classical. I would have settled for death metal polka.

Rachel shook her head. "Then who—?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But the Beast…in my dream, he called me his forefather. He assumed I would recognize him. And if my godly memory was intact, I think I would. His demeanor, his accent, his facial structure—I have met him before, just not in modern times."

Meg had grown very quiet. I got the distinct impression she was trying to disappear into the couch cushions. Normally, this would not have bothered me, but after our experience in the Labyrinth, I felt guilty every time I mentioned the Beast. My pesky mortal conscience must have been acting up.

"The name Triumvirate…" I tapped my forehead, trying to shake loose information that was no longer there. "The last triumvirate I dealt with included Lepidus, Marc Antony, and my son, the *original* Octavian. A triumvirate is a very Roman concept…like patriotism, skullduggery, and assassination."

Chiron stroked his beard. "You think these men are ancient Romans? How is that possible? Hades is quite good at tracking down escaped spirits from the Underworld. He would not allow three men from ancient times to run amok in the modern world for centuries."

"Again, I do not know." Saying this so often offended my divine sensibilities. I decided that when I returned to Olympus, I would have to gargle the bad taste out of my mouth with Tabasco-flavored nectar. "But it seems these

men have been plotting against us for a very long time. They funded Luke Castellan's war. They supplied aid to Camp Jupiter when the Romans attacked Camp Half-Blood. And despite those two wars, the Triumvirate is still out there—still plotting. What if this company is the root cause of…well, everything?"

Chiron looked at me as if I were digging his grave. "That is a very troubling thought. Could three men be so powerful?"

I spread my hands. "You've lived long enough to know, my friend. Gods, monsters, Titans…these are always dangerous. But the greatest threat to demigods has always been other demigods. Whoever this Triumvirate is, we must stop them before they take control of the Oracles."

Rachel sat up straight. "Excuse me? Oracles plural?"

"Ah…didn't I tell you about them when I was a god?"

Her eyes regained some of their dark green intensity. I feared she was envisioning ways she might inflict pain upon me with her art supplies.

"No," she said levelly, "you did not tell me about them."

"Oh…well, my mortal memory has been faulty, you see. I had to read some books in order to—"

"Oracles," she repeated. "Plural."

I took a deep breath. I wanted to assure her that those other Oracles didn't mean a thing to me! Rachel was special! Unfortunately, I doubted she was in a place where she could hear that right now. I decided it was best to speak plainly.

"In ancient times," I said, "there were many Oracles. Of course Delphi was the most famous, but there were four others of comparable power."

Chiron shook his head. "But those were destroyed ages ago."

"So I thought," I agreed. "Now I am not so sure. I believe Triumvirate Holdings wants to control *all* the ancient Oracles. And I believe the most ancient Oracle of all, the Grove of Dodona, is right here at Camp Half-Blood."

21

Up in my business
Always burning Oracles
Romans gonna hate

I WAS A DRAMATIC GOD.

I thought my last statement was a great line. I expected gasps, perhaps some organ music in the background. Maybe the lights would go out just before I could say more. Moments later, I would be found dead with a knife in my back. That would be exciting!

Wait. I'm mortal. Murder would kill me. Never mind.

At any rate, none of that happened. My three companions just stared at me.

"Four other Oracles," Rachel said. "You mean you have four other Pythias __"

"No, my dear. There is only one Pythia—*you.* Delphi is absolutely unique."

Rachel still looked like she wanted to jam a number ten bristle paintbrush up my nose. "So these other four *non-unique* Oracles…"

"Well, one was the Sybil of Cumae." I wiped the sweat off my palms. (Why did mortal palms sweat?) "You know, she wrote the Sibylline Books—those prophecies that Ella the harpy memorized."

Meg looked back and forth between us. "A harpy…like those chicken ladies who clean up after lunch?"

Chiron smiled. "Ella is a very special harpy, Meg. Years ago, she somehow came across a copy of the prophetic books, which we thought were burned before the Fall of Rome. Right now, our friends at Camp Jupiter are trying to reconstruct them based on Ella's recollections."

Rachel crossed her arms. "And the other three Oracles? I'm sure none of them was a beautiful young priestess whom you praised for her…what was it?…'scintillating conversation'?"

“Ah…” I wasn’t sure why, but it felt like my acne was turning into live insects and crawling across my face. “Well, according to my extensive research —”

“Some books he flipped through last night,” Meg clarified.

“Ahem! There was an Oracle at Erythaea, and another at the Cave of Trophonius.”

“Goodness,” Chiron said. “I’d forgotten about those two.”

I shrugged. I remembered almost nothing about them either. They had been some of my less successful prophetic franchises.

“And the fifth,” I said, “was the Grove of Dodona.”

“A grove,” Meg said. “Like trees.”

“Yes, Meg, like trees. Groves are typically composed of trees, rather than, say, Fudgsicles. Dodona was a stand of sacred oaks planted by the Mother Goddess in the first days of the world. They were ancient even when the Olympians were born.”

“The Mother Goddess?” Rachel shivered in her patina jacket. “Please tell me you don’t mean Gaea.”

“No, thankfully. I mean Rhea, Queen of the Titans, the mother of the first generation of Olympian gods. Her sacred trees could actually speak. Sometimes they issued prophecies.”

“The voices in the woods,” Meg guessed.

“Exactly. I believe the Grove of Dodona has regrown itself here in the woods at camp. In my dreams, I saw a crowned woman imploring me to find her Oracle. I believe it was Rhea, though I still don’t understand why she was wearing a peace symbol or using the term *dig it*.”

“A peace symbol?” Chiron asked.

“A large brass one,” I confirmed.

Rachel drummed her fingers on the couch’s armrest. “If Rhea is a Titan, isn’t she evil?”

“Not all Titans were bad,” I said. “Rhea was a gentle soul. She sided with the gods in their first great war. I think she wants us to succeed. She doesn’t want her grove in the hands of our enemies.”

Chiron’s tail twitched. “My friend, Rhea has not been seen for millennia. Her grove was burned in the ancient times. Emperor Theodosius ordered the last oak cut down in—”

“I know.” I got a stabbing pain right between my eyes, as I always did when someone mentioned Theodosius. I now recalled that the bully had closed all the ancient temples across the empire, basically evicting us Olympian gods. I used to have an archery target with his face on it. “Nevertheless, many things from the

old days have survived or regenerated. The Labyrinth has rebuilt itself. Why couldn't a grove of sacred trees spring up again right here in this valley?"

Meg pushed herself deeper into the cushions. "This is all weird." Leave it to the young McCaffrey to summarize our conversation so effectively. "So if the tree voices are sacred and stuff, why are they making people get lost?"

"For once, you ask a good question." I hoped such praise wouldn't go to Meg's head. "In the old days, the priests of Dodona would take care of the trees, pruning them, watering them, and channeling their voices by hanging wind chimes in their branches."

"How would that help?" Meg asked.

"I don't know. I'm not a tree priest. But with proper care, these trees could divine the future."

Rachel smoothed her skirt. "And without proper care?"

"The voices were unfocused," I said. "A wild choir of disharmony." I paused, quite pleased with that line. I was hoping someone might write it down for posterity, but no one did. "Untended, the grove could most definitely drive mortals to madness."

Chiron furrowed his brow. "So our missing campers are wandering in the trees, perhaps already insane from the voices."

"Or they're dead," Meg added.

"No." I could not abide that thought. "No, they are still alive. The Beast is using them, trying to bait me."

"How can you be sure?" Rachel asked. "And why? If Python already controls Delphi, why are these other Oracles so important?"

I gazed at the wall formerly graced by my picture. Alas, no answers magically appeared in the whitewashed space. "I'm not sure. I believe our enemies want to cut us off from every possible source of prophecy. Without a way to see and direct our fates, we will wither and die—gods and mortals alike, anyone who opposes the Triumvirate."

Meg turned upside down on the sofa and kicked off her red shoes. "They're strangling our taproots." She wriggled her toes to demonstrate.

I looked back at Rachel, hoping she would excuse my street urchin overlord's bad manners. "As for why the Grove of Dodona is so important, Python mentioned that it was the one Oracle he could not control. I don't understand exactly why—perhaps because Dodona is the only Oracle that has no connection with me. Its power comes from Rhea. So if the grove is working, and it is free of Python's influence, and it is here at Camp Half-Blood—"

"It could provide us with prophecies." Chiron's eyes gleamed. "It could give us a chance against our enemies."

I gave Rachel an apologetic smile. “Of course, we’d rather have our beloved Oracle of Delphi working again. And we will, eventually. But for now, the Grove of Dodona could be our best hope.”

Meg’s hair swept the floor. Her face was now the color of one of my sacred cattle. “Aren’t prophecies all twisted and mysterious and murky, and people die trying to escape them?”

“Meg,” I said, “you can’t trust those reviews on RateMyOracle.com. The hotness factor for the Sibyl of Cumae, for instance, is *completely* off. I remember *that* quite clearly.”

Rachel put her chin on her fist. “Really? Do tell.”

“Uh, what I meant to say: the Grove of Dodona is a benevolent force. It has helped heroes before. The masthead of the original *Argo*, for instance, was carved from a branch of the sacred trees. It could speak to the Argonauts and give them guidance.”

“Mm.” Chiron nodded. “And that’s why our mysterious Beast wants the grove burned.”

“Apparently,” I said. “And that’s why we have to save it.”

Meg rolled backward off the couch. Her legs knocked over the three-legged coffee table, spilling our Arizona tea and crackers. “Oops.”

I ground my mortal teeth, which would not last a year if I kept hanging around Meg. Rachel and Chiron wisely ignored my young friend’s display of Megness.

“Apollo…” The old centaur watched a waterfall of tea trickling from the edge of the table. “If you are right about Dodona, how do we proceed? We are already shorthanded. If we send search teams into the woods, we have no guarantee they’ll come back.”

Meg brushed the hair out of her eyes. “We’ll go. Just Apollo and me.”

My tongue attempted to hide in the depths of my throat. “We—we will?”

“You said you gotta do a bunch of trials or whatever to prove you’re worthy, right? This’ll be the first one.”

Part of me knew she was right, but the remnants of my godly self rebelled at the idea. I never did my own dirty work. I would rather have picked a nice group of heroes and sent them to their deaths—or, you know, glorious success.

Yet Rhea had been clear in my dream: finding the Oracle was my job. And thanks to the cruelty of Zeus, where I went, Meg went. For all I knew, Zeus was aware of the Beast and his plans, and he had sent me here specifically to deal with the situation…a thought that did not make me any more likely to get him a nice tie for Father’s Day.

I also remembered the other part of my dream: the Beast in his mauve suit,

encouraging me to find the Oracle so he could burn it down. There was still too much I didn't understand, but I had to act. Austin and Kayla were depending on me.

Rachel put her hand on my knee, which made me flinch. Surprisingly, she did not inflict any pain. Her gaze was more earnest than angry. "Apollo, you have to try. If we can get a glimpse of the future…well, it may be the only way to get things back to normal." She looked longingly at the blank walls of her cave. "I'd like to have a future again."

Chiron shifted his forelegs. "What do you need from us, old friend? How can we help?"

I glanced at Meg. Sadly, I could tell that we were in agreement. We were stuck with each other. We couldn't risk anyone else.

"Meg is right," I said. "We have to do this ourselves. We should leave immediately, but—"

"We've been up all night," Meg said. "We need some sleep."

Wonderful, I thought. Now Meg is finishing my sentences.

This time I could not argue with her logic. Despite my fervor to rush into the woods and save my children, I had to proceed cautiously. I could not mess up this rescue. And I was increasingly certain that the Beast would keep his captives alive for now. He needed them to lure me into his trap.

Chiron rose on his front hooves. "This evening, then. Rest and prepare, my heroes. I fear you will need all your strength and wits for what comes next."

22

Armed to the eyeballs:
A combat ukulele
Magic Brazil scarf

SUN GODS ARE NOT GOOD at sleeping during the day, but somehow I managed a fitful nap.

When I woke in the late afternoon, I found the camp in a state of agitation.

Kayla and Austin's disappearance had been the tipping point. The other campers were now so rattled, no one could maintain a normal schedule. I suppose a single demigod disappearing every few weeks felt like a normal casualty rate. But a pair of demigods disappearing in the middle of a camp-sanctioned activity—that meant no one was safe.

Word must have spread of our conference in the cave. The Victor twins had stuffed wads of cotton in their ears to foil the oracular voices. Julia and Alice had climbed to the top of the lava wall and were using binoculars to scan the woods, no doubt hoping to spot the Grove of Dodona, but I doubted they could see the trees for the forest.

Everywhere I went, people were unhappy to see me. Damien and Chiara sat together at the canoe dock, glowering in my direction. Sherman Yang waved me away when I tried to talk with him. He was busy decorating the Ares cabin with frag grenades and brightly decorated claymores. If it had been Saturnalia, he definitely would have won the prize for most violent holiday decorations.

Even the Athena Parthenos stared down at me accusingly from the top of the hill as if to say, *This is all your fault.*

She was right. If I hadn't let Python take over Delphi, if I'd paid more attention to the other ancient Oracles, if I hadn't lost my divinity—

Stop it, Apollo, I scolded myself. *You're beautiful and everyone loves you.*

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe that. My father, Zeus,

did not love me. The demigods at Camp Half-Blood did not love me. Python and the Beast and his comrades at Triumvirate Holdings did not love me. It was almost enough to make me question my self-worth.

No, no. That was crazy talk.

Chiron and Rachel were nowhere to be seen. Nyssa Barrera informed me that they were hoping against hope to use the camp's sole Internet connection, in Chiron's office, to access more information about Triumvirate Holdings. Harley was with them for tech support. They were presently on hold with Comcast customer service and might not emerge for hours, if indeed they survived the ordeal at all.

I found Meg at the armory, browsing for battle supplies. She had strapped a leather cuirass over her green dress and greaves over orange leggings, so she looked like a kindergartener reluctantly stuffed into combat gear by her parents.

"Perhaps a shield?" I suggested.

"Nuh-uh." She showed me her rings. "I always use two swords. Plus I need a free hand for slapping when you act stupid."

I had the uncomfortable sense she was serious.

From the weapon rack, she pulled out a long bow and offered it to me.

I recoiled. "No."

"It's your best weapon. You're Apollo."

I swallowed back the tang of mortal bile. "I swore an oath. I'm not the god of archery or music anymore. I won't use a bow or a musical instrument until I can use them *properly*."

"Stupid oath." She didn't slap me, but she looked like she wanted to. "What will you do, just stand around and cheer while I fight?"

That had indeed been my plan, but now I felt silly admitting it. I scanned the weapon display and grabbed a sword. Even without drawing it, I could tell it would be too heavy and awkward for me to use, but I strapped the scabbard around my waist.

"There," I said. "Happy?"

Meg did not appear happy. Nevertheless, she returned the bow to its place.

"Fine," she said. "But you'd better have my back."

I had never understood that expression. It made me think of the KICK ME signs Artemis used to tape to my toga during festival days. Still, I nodded. "Your back shall be had."

We reached the edge of the woods and found a small going-away party waiting for us: Will and Nico, Paolo Montes, Malcolm Pace, and Billie Ng, all with grim faces.

"Be careful," Will told me. "And here."

Before I could object, he placed a ukulele in my hands.

I tried to give it back. “I can’t. I made an oath—”

“Yeah, I know. That was stupid of you. But it’s a combat ukulele. You can fight with it if you need to.”

I looked more closely at the instrument. It was made from Celestial bronze—thin sheets of metal acid-etched to resemble the grain of blond oak wood. The instrument weighed next to nothing, yet I imagined it was almost indestructible.

“The work of Hephaestus?” I asked.

Will shook his head. “The work of Harley. He wanted you to have it. Just sling it over your back. For me and Harley. It’ll make us both feel better.”

I decided I was obliged to honor the request, though my possession of a ukulele had rarely made anyone feel better. Don’t ask me why. When I was a god, I used to do an absolutely blistering ukulele version of “Satisfaction.”

Nico handed me some ambrosia wrapped in a napkin.

“I can’t eat this,” I reminded him.

“It’s not for you.” He glanced at Meg, his eyes full of misgiving. I remembered that the son of Hades had his own ways of sensing the future—futures that involved the possibility of death. I shivered and tucked the ambrosia into my coat pocket. As aggravating as Meg could be, I was deeply unsettled by the idea that she might come to harm. I decided that I could not allow that to happen.

Malcolm was showing Meg a parchment map, pointing out various places in the woods that we should avoid. Paolo—looking completely healed from his leg surgery—stood next to him, carefully and earnestly providing Portuguese commentary that no one could understand.

When they were finished with the map, Billie Ng approached Meg.

Billie was a wisp of a girl. She compensated for her diminutive stature with the fashion sense of a K-Pop idol. Her winter coat was the color of aluminum foil. Her bobbed hair was aquamarine and her makeup gold. I completely approved. In fact, I thought I could rock that look myself if I could just get my acne under control.

Billie gave Meg a flashlight and a small packet of flower seeds.

“Just in case,” Billie said.

Meg seemed quite overwhelmed. She gave Billie a fierce hug.

I didn’t understand the purpose of the seeds, but it was comforting to know that in a dire emergency I could hit people with my ukulele while Meg planted geraniums.

Malcolm Pace gave me his parchment map. “When in doubt, veer to the right. That usually works in the woods, though I don’t know why.”

Paolo offered me a green-and-gold scarf—a bandana version of the Brazilian flag. He said something that, of course, I could not understand.

Nico smirked. “That’s Paolo’s good-luck bandana. I think he wants you to wear it. He believes it will make you invincible.”

I found this dubious, since Paolo was prone to serious injury, but as a god, I had learned never to turn down offerings. “Thank you.”

Paolo gripped my shoulders and kissed my cheeks. I may have blushed. He was quite handsome when he wasn’t bleeding out from dismemberment.

I rested my hand on Will’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll be back by dawn.”

His mouth trembled ever so slightly. “How can you be sure?”

“I’m the sun god,” I said, trying to muster more confidence than I felt. “I *always* return at dawn.”

Of course it rained. Why would it not?

Up in Mount Olympus, Zeus must have been having a good laugh at my expense. Camp Half-Blood was supposed to be protected from severe weather, but no doubt my father had told Aeolus to pull out all the stops on his winds. My jilted ex-girlfriends among the air nymphs were probably enjoying their moment of payback.

The rain was just on the edge of sleet—liquid enough to soak my clothes, icy enough to slam against my exposed face like glass shards.

We stumbled along, lurching from tree to tree to find any shelter we could. Patches of old snow crunched under my feet. My ukulele got heavier as its sound hole filled with rain. Meg’s flashlight beam cut across the storm like a cone of yellow static.

I led the way, not because I had any destination in mind, but because I was angry. I was tired of being cold and soaked. I was tired of being picked on. Mortals often talk about the whole world being against them, but that is ridiculous. Mortals aren’t that important. In my case, the whole world really *was* against me. I refused to surrender to such abuse. I would do something about it! I just wasn’t quite sure what.

From time to time we heard monsters in the distance—the roar of a drakon, the harmonized howl of a two-headed wolf—but nothing showed itself. On a night like this, any self-respecting monster would’ve remained in its lair, warm and cozy.

After what seemed like hours, Meg stifled a scream. I heroically leaped to her side, my hand on my sword. (I would have drawn it, but it was really heavy and got stuck in the scabbard.) At Meg’s feet, wedged in the mud, was a

glistening black shell the size of a boulder. It was cracked down the middle, the edges splattered with a foul gooey substance.

"I almost stepped on that." Meg covered her mouth as if she might be sick.

I inched closer. The shell was the crushed carapace of a giant insect. Nearby, camouflaged among the tree roots, lay one of the beast's dismembered legs.

"It's a *myrmeke*," I said. "Or it was."

Behind her rain-splattered glasses, Meg's eyes were impossible to read. "A *murr-murr-key?*"

"A giant ant. There must be a colony somewhere in the woods."

Meg gagged. "I hate bugs."

That made sense for a daughter of the agriculture goddess, but to me the dead ant didn't seem any grosser than the piles of garbage in which we often swam.

"Well, don't worry," I said. "This one is dead. Whatever killed it must've had powerful jaws to crack that shell."

"Not comforting. Are—are these things dangerous?"

I laughed. "Oh, yes. They range in size from as small as dogs to larger than grizzly bears. One time I watched a colony of myrmekes attack a Greek army in India. It was hilarious. They spit acid that can melt through bronze armor and—"

"Apollo."

My smile faded. I reminded myself I was no longer a spectator. These ants could kill us. Easily. And Meg was scared.

"Right," I said. "Well, the rain should keep the myrmekes in their tunnels. Just don't make yourself an attractive target. They like bright, shiny things."

"Like flashlights?"

"Um…"

Meg handed me the flashlight. "Lead on, Apollo."

I thought that was unfair, but we forged ahead.

After another hour or so (surely the woods weren't this big), the rain tapered off, leaving the ground steaming.

The air got warmer. The humidity approached bathhouse levels. Thick white vapor curled off the tree branches.

"What's going on?" Meg wiped her face. "Feels like a tropical rain forest now."

I had no answer. Then, up ahead, I heard a massive flushing sound—like water being forced through pipes…or fissures.

I couldn't help but smile. "A geyser."

"A geyser," Meg repeated. "Like Old Faithful?"

"This is excellent news. Perhaps we can get directions. Our lost demigods

might have even found sanctuary there!”

“With the geysers,” Meg said.

“No, my ridiculous girl,” I said. “With the geyser *gods.* Assuming they’re in a good mood, this could be great.”

“And if they’re in a bad mood?”

“Then we’ll cheer them up before they can boil us. Follow me!”

23

Scale of one to ten
How would you rate your demise?
Thanks for your input

WAS I RECKLESS to rush toward such volatile nature gods?

Please. Second-guessing myself is not in my nature. It's a trait I've never needed.

True, my memories about the *palikoi* were a little hazy. As I recalled, the geyser gods in ancient Sicily used to give refuge to runaway slaves, so they must be kindly spirits. Perhaps they would also give refuge to lost demigods, or at least notice when five of them wandered through their territory, muttering incoherently. Besides, I was Apollo! The palikoi would be honored to meet a major Olympian such as myself! The fact that geysers often blew their tops, spewing columns of scalding hot water hundreds of feet in the air, wasn't going to stop me from making some new fans…I mean *friends*.

The clearing opened before us like an oven door. A wall of heat billowed through the trees and washed over my face. I could feel my pores opening to drink in the moisture, which would hopefully help my spotty complexion.

The scene before us had no business being in a Long Island winter. Glistening vines wreathed the tree branches. Tropical flowers bloomed from the forest floor. A red parrot sat on a banana tree heavy with green bunches.

In the midst of the glade stood two geysers—twin holes in the ground, ringed with a figure eight of gray mud pots. The craters bubbled and hissed, but they were not spewing at the moment. I decided to take that as a good omen.

Meg's boots squished in the mud. "Is it safe?"

"Definitely not," I said. "We'll need an offering. Perhaps your packet of seeds?"

Meg punched my arm. "Those are magic. For life-and-death emergencies.

What about your ukulele? You're not going to play it anyway."

"A man of honor *never* surrenders his ukulele." I perked up. "But wait. You've given me an idea. I will offer the geyser gods a poem! I can still do that. It doesn't count as music."

Meg frowned. "Uh, I don't know if—"

"Don't be envious, Meg. I will make up a poem for you later. This will surely please the geyser gods!" I walked forward, spread my arms, and began to improvise:

ı, geyser, my geyser,
us spew then, you and I,
ɔn this midnight dreary, while we ponder
ɔse woods are these?
we have not gone gentle into this good night,
have wandered lonely as clouds.
seek to know for whom the bell tolls,
hope, springs eternal,
t the time has come to talk of many things!"

I don't wish to brag, but I thought it was rather good, even if I did recycle a few bits from my earlier works. Unlike my music and archery, my godly skills with poetry seemed to be completely intact.

I glanced at Meg, hoping to see shining admiration on her face. It was high time the girl started to appreciate me. Instead, her mouth hung open, aghast.

"What?" I demanded. "Did you fail poetry appreciation in school? That was first-rate stuff!"

Meg pointed toward the geysers. I realized she was not looking at me at all.

"Well," said a raspy voice, "you got my attention."

One of the palikoi hovered over his geyser. His lower half was nothing but steam. From the waist up, he was perhaps twice the size of a human, with muscular arms the color of caldera mud, chalk-white eyes, and hair like cappuccino foam, as if he had shampooed vigorously and left it sudsy. His massive chest was stuffed into a baby-blue polo shirt with a logo of trees embroidered on the chest pocket.

"O, Great Palikos!" I said. "We beseech you—"

"What was that?" the spirit interrupted. "That stuff you were saying?"

"Poetry!" I said. "For you!"

He tapped his mud-gray chin. "No. That wasn't poetry."

I couldn't believe it. Did *no one* appreciate the beauty of language anymore? "My good spirit," I said. "Poetry doesn't have to rhyme, you know."

"I'm not talking about rhyming. I'm talking about getting your message across. We do a lot of market research, and that would *not* fly for our campaign. Now, the Oscar Meyer Weiner song—*that* is poetry. The ad is fifty years old and people are still singing it. Do you think you could give us some poetry like that?"

I glanced at Meg to be sure I was not imagining this conversation.

"Listen here," I told the geyser god, "I've been the lord of poetry for four thousand years. I ought to know good poetry—"

The palikos waved his hands. "Let's start over. I'll run through our spiel, and maybe you can advise me. Hi, I'm Pete. Welcome to the Woods at Camp Half-Blood! Would you be willing to take a short customer satisfaction survey after this encounter? Your feedback is important."

"Um—"

"Great. Thanks."

Pete fished around in his vaporous region where his pockets would be. He produced a glossy brochure and began to read. "The Woods are your one-stop destination for…Hmm, it says *fun*. I thought we changed that to *exhilaration*. See, you've got to choose your words with care. If Paulie were here…" Pete sighed. "Well, he's better with the showmanship. Anyway, welcome to the Woods at Camp Half-Blood!"

"You already said that," I noted.

"Oh, right." Pete produced a red pen and began to edit.

"Hey." Meg shouldered past me. She had been speechless with awe for about twelve seconds, which must've been a new record. "Mr. Steamy Mud, have you seen any lost demigods?"

"Mr. Steamy Mud!" Pete slapped his brochure. "*That* is effective branding! And great point about lost demigods. We can't have our guests wandering around aimlessly. We should be handing out maps at the entrance to the woods. So many wonderful things to see in here, and no one even knows about them. I'll talk to Paulie when he gets back."

Meg took off her fogged-up glasses. "Who's Paulie?"

Pete gestured at the second geyser. "My partner. Maybe we could add a map to this brochure if—"

"So *have* you seen any lost demigods?" I asked.

"What?" Pete tried to mark his brochure, but the steam had made it so soggy, his red pen went right through the paper. "Oh, no. Not recently. But we should have better signage. For instance, did you even know these geysers were here?"

“No,” I admitted.

“Well, there you go! Double geysers—the only ones on Long Island!—and no one even knows about us. No outreach. No word-of-mouth. This is why we convinced the board of directors to hire us!”

Meg and I looked at each other. I could tell that for once we were on the same wavelength: utter confusion.

“Sorry,” I said. “Are you telling me the forest has a board of directors?”

“Well, of course,” Pete said. “The dryads, the other nature spirits, the sentient monsters…I mean, *somebody* has to think about property values and services and public relations. It wasn’t easy getting the board to hire us for marketing, either. If we mess up this job…oh, man.”

Meg squished her shoes in the mud. “Can we go? I don’t understand what this guy’s talking about.”

“And that’s the problem!” Pete moaned. “How do we write clear ad copy that conveys the right image of the Woods? For instance, palikoi like Paulie and me used to be famous! Major tourist destinations! People would come to us to make binding oaths. Runaway slaves would seek us out for shelter. We’d get sacrifices, offerings, prayers…it was great. Now, nothing.”

I heaved a sigh. “I know how you feel.”

“Guys,” Meg said, “we’re looking for missing demigods.”

“Right,” I agreed. “O, Great…Pete, do you have any idea where our lost friends might have gone? Perhaps you know of some secret locations within the woods?”

Pete’s chalk-white eyes brightened. “Did you know the children of Hephaestus have a hidden workshop to the north called Bunker Nine?”

“I did, actually,” I said.

“Oh.” A puff of steam escaped Pete’s left nostril. “Well, did you know the Labyrinth has rebuilt itself? There is an entrance right here in the woods—”

“We know,” Meg said.

Pete looked crestfallen.

“But perhaps,” I said, “that’s because your marketing campaign is working.”

“Do you think so?” Pete’s foamy hair began to swirl. “Yes. Yes, that may be true! Did you happen to see our spotlights, too? Those were my idea.”

“Spotlights?” Meg asked.

Twin beams of red light blasted from the geysers and swept across the sky. Lit from beneath, Pete looked like the world’s scariest teller of ghost stories.

“Unfortunately, they attracted the wrong kind of attention.” Pete sighed. “Paulie doesn’t let me use them often. He suggested advertising on a blimp instead, or perhaps a giant inflatable King Kong—”

“That’s cool,” Meg interrupted. “But can you tell us anything about a secret grove with whispering trees?”

I had to admit, Meg was good at getting us back on topic. As a poet, I did not cultivate directness. But as an archer, I could appreciate the value of a straight shot.

“Oh.” Pete floated lower in his cloud of steam, the spotlight turning him the color of cherry soda. “I’m not supposed to talk about the grove.”

My once-godly ears tingled. I resisted the urge to scream, *AHA!* “Why can’t you talk about the grove, Pete?”

The spirit fiddled with his soggy brochure. “Paulie said it would scare away tourists. ‘Talk about the dragons,’ he told me. ‘Talk about the wolves and serpents and ancient killing machines. But don’t mention the grove.’”

“Ancient killing machines?” Meg asked.

“Yeah,” Pete said halfheartedly. “We’re marketing them as fun family entertainment. But the grove…Paulie said that was our worst problem. The neighborhood isn’t even *zoned* for an Oracle. Paulie went there to see if maybe we could relocate it, but—”

“He didn’t come back,” I guessed.

Pete nodded miserably. “How am I supposed to run the marketing campaign all by myself? Sure, I can use robo-calls for the phone surveys, but a lot of networking has to be done face-to-face, and Paulie was always better with that stuff.” Pete’s voice broke into a sad hiss. “I miss him.”

“Maybe we could find him,” Meg suggested, “and bring him back.”

Pete shook his head. “Paulie made me promise not to follow him and not to tell anybody else where the grove is. He’s pretty good at resisting those weird voices, but you guys wouldn’t stand a chance.”

I was tempted to agree. Finding ancient killing machines sounded much more reasonable. Then I pictured Kayla and Austin wandering through the ancient grove, slowly going mad. They needed me, which meant I needed their location.

“Sorry, Pete.” I gave him my most critical stare—the one I used to crush aspiring singers during Broadway auditions. “I’m just not buying it.”

Mud bubbled around Pete’s caldera. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“I don’t think this grove exists,” I said. “And if it does, I don’t think you know its location.”

Pete’s geyser rumbled. Steam swirled in his spotlight beam. “I—I *do* know! Of course it exists!”

“Oh, really? Then why aren’t there billboards about it all over the place? And a dedicated Web site? Why haven’t I seen a groveofdodona hashtag on

social media?”

Pete glowered. “I suggested all that! Paulie shot me down!”

“So do some outreach!” I demanded. “Sell us on your product! Show us where this grove is!”

“I can’t. The only entrance…” He glanced over my shoulder and his face went slack. “Ah, spew.” His spotlights shut off.

I turned. Meg made a squelching sound even louder than her shoes in the mud.

It took a moment for my vision to adjust, but at the edge of the clearing stood three black ants the size of Sherman tanks.

“Pete,” I said, trying to remain calm, “when you said your spotlights attracted the wrong kind of attention—”

“I meant the myrmekes,” he said. “I hope this won’t affect your online review of the Woods at Camp Half-Blood.”

24

Breaking my promise
Spectacularly failing
I blame Neil Diamond

MYRMEKES SHOULD BE high on your list of monsters not to fight.

They attack in groups. They spit acid. Their pincers can snap through Celestial bronze.

Also, they are ugly.

The three soldier ants advanced, their ten-foot-long antennae waving and bobbing in a mesmerizing way, trying to distract me from the true danger of their mandibles.

Their beaked heads reminded me of chickens—chickens with dark flat eyes and black armored faces. Each of their six legs would have made a fine construction winch. Their oversize abdomens throbbed and pulsed like noses sniffing for food.

I silently cursed Zeus for inventing ants. The way I heard it, he got upset with some greedy man who was always stealing from his neighbors' crops, so Zeus turned him into the first ant—a species that does nothing but scavenge, steal, and breed. Ares liked to joke that if Zeus wanted such a species, he could've just left humans the way they were. I used to laugh. Now that I am one of you, I no longer find it funny.

The ants stepped toward us, their antennae twitching. I imagined their train of thought was something like *Shiny? Tasty? Defenseless?*

"No sudden movements," I told Meg, who did not seem inclined to move at all. In fact, she looked petrified.

"Oh, Pete?" I called. "How do you deal with myrmekes invading your territory?"

"By hiding," he said, and disappeared into the geyser.

“Not helpful,” I grumbled.

“Can we dive in?” Meg asked.

“Only if you fancy boiling to death in a pit of scalding water.”

The tank bugs clacked their mandibles and edged closer.

“I have an idea.” I unslung my ukulele.

“I thought you swore not to play,” Meg said.

“I did. But if I throw this shiny object to one side, the ants might—”

I was about to say *the ants might follow it and leave us alone*.

I neglected to consider that, in my hands, the ukulele made me look shinier and tastier. Before I could throw the instrument, the soldier ants surged toward us. I stumbled back, only remembering the geyser behind me when my shoulder blades began to blister, filling the air with Apollo-scented steam.

“Hey, bugs!” Meg’s scimitars flashed in her hands, making her the new shiniest thing in the clearing.

Can we take a moment to appreciate that Meg did this *on purpose*? Terrified of insects, she could have fled and left me to be devoured. Instead, she chose to risk her life by distracting three tank-size ants. Throwing garbage at street thugs was one thing. But this…this was an entirely new level of foolishness. If I lived, I might have to nominate Meg McCaffrey for Best Sacrifice at the next Demi Awards.

Two of the ants charged at Meg. The third stayed on me, though he turned his head long enough for me to sprint to one side.

Meg ran between her opponents, her golden blades severing a leg from each. Their mandibles snapped at empty air. The soldier bugs wobbled on their five remaining legs, tried to turn, and bonked heads.

Meanwhile, the third ant charged me. In a panic, I threw my combat ukulele. It bounced off the ant’s forehead with a dissonant *twang*.

I tugged my sword free of its scabbard. I’ve always hated swords. Such inelegant weapons, and they require you to be in close combat. How unwise, when you can shoot your enemies with an arrow from across the world!

The ant spit acid, and I tried to swat away the goop.

Perhaps that wasn’t the brightest idea. I often got sword fighting and tennis confused. At least some of the acid splattered the ant’s eyes, which bought me a few seconds. I valiantly retreated, raising my sword only to find that the blade had been eaten away, leaving me nothing but a steaming hilt.

“Oh, Meg?” I called helplessly.

She was otherwise occupied. Her swords whirled in golden arcs of destruction, lopping off leg segments, slicing antennae. I had never seen a dimachaerus fight with such skill, and I had seen all the best gladiators in

combat. Unfortunately, her blades only sparked off the ants' thick main carapaces. Glancing blows and dismemberment did not faze them at all. As good as Meg was, the ants had more legs, more weight, more ferocity, and slightly more acid-spitting ability.

My own opponent snapped at me. I managed to avoid its mandibles, but its armored face bashed the side of my head. I staggered and fell. One ear canal seemed to fill with molten iron.

My vision clouded. Across the clearing, the other ants flanked Meg, using their acid to herd her toward the woods. She dove behind a tree and came up with only one of her blades. She tried to stab the closest ant but was driven back by acid cross fire. Her leggings were smoking, peppered with holes. Her face was tight with pain.

"Peaches," I muttered to myself. "Where is that stupid diaper demon when we need him?"

The karpos did not appear. Perhaps the presence of the geyser gods or some other force in the woods kept him away. Perhaps the board of directors had a rule against pets.

The third ant loomed over me, its mandibles foaming with green saliva. Its breath smelled worse than Hephaestus's work shirts.

My next decision I could blame on my head injury. I could tell you I wasn't thinking clearly, but that isn't true. I was desperate. I was terrified. I wanted to help Meg. Mostly I wanted to save myself. I saw no other option, so I dove for my ukulele.

I know. I promised on the River Styx not to play music until I was a god once more. But even such a dire oath can seem unimportant when a giant ant is about to melt your face off.

I grabbed the instrument, rolled onto my back, and belted out "Sweet Caroline."

Even without my oath, I would only have done something like that in the most extreme emergency. When I sing that song, the chances of mutually assured destruction are too great. But I saw no other choice. I gave it my utmost effort, channeling all the saccharine schmaltz I could muster from the 1970s.

The giant ant shook its head. Its antennae quivered. I got to my feet as the monster crawled drunkenly toward me. I put my back to the geyser and launched into the chorus.

The *Dah! Dah! Dah!* did the trick. Blinded by disgust and rage, the ant charged. I rolled aside as the monster's momentum carried it forward, straight into the muddy cauldron.

Believe me, the only thing that smells *worse* than Hephaestus's work shirts is

a myrmeke boiling in its own shell.

Somewhere behind me, Meg screamed. I turned in time to see her second sword fly from her hand. She collapsed as one of the myrmekes caught her in its mandibles.

“NO!” I shrieked.

The ant did not snap her in half. It simply held her—limp and unconscious.

“Meg!” I yelled again. I strummed the ukulele desperately. “Sweet Caroline!”

But my voice was gone. Defeating one ant had taken all my energy. (I don’t think I have ever written a sadder sentence than that.) I tried to run to Meg’s aid, but I stumbled and fell. The world turned pale yellow. I hunched on all fours and vomited.

I have a concussion, I thought, but I had no idea what to do about it. It seemed like ages since I had been a god of healing.

I may have lay in the mud for minutes or hours while my brain slowly gyrated inside my skull. By the time I managed to stand, the two ants were gone.

There was no sign of Meg McCaffrey.

25

I'm on a roll now
Boiling, burning, throwing up
Lions? Hey, why not?

I STUMBLED THROUGH the glade, shouting Meg's name. I knew it was pointless, but yelling felt good. I looked for signs of broken branches or trampled ground. Surely two tank-size ants would leave a trail I could follow. But I was not Artemis; I did not have my sister's skill with tracking. I had no idea which direction they'd taken my friend.

I retrieved Meg's swords from the mud. Instantly, they changed into gold rings—so small, so easily lost, like a mortal life. I may have cried. I tried to break my ridiculous combat ukulele, but the Celestial bronze instrument defied my attempts. Finally, I yanked off the A string, threaded it through Meg's rings, and tied them around my neck.

"Meg, I will find you," I muttered.

Her abduction was my fault. I was sure of this. By playing music and saving myself, I had broken my oath on the River Styx. Instead of punishing me directly, Zeus or the Fates or all the gods together had visited their wrath upon Meg McCaffrey.

How could I have been so foolish? Whenever I angered the other gods, those closest to me were struck down. I'd lost Daphne because of one careless comment to Eros. I'd lost the beautiful Hyacinthus because of a quarrel with Zephyros. Now my broken oath would cost Meg her life.

No, I told myself. *I won't allow it.*

I was so nauseous, I could barely walk. Someone seemed to be inflating a balloon inside my brain. Yet I managed to stumble to the rim of Pete's geyser.

"Pete!" I shouted. "Show yourself, you cowardly telemarketer!"

Water shot skyward with a sound like the blast of an organ's lowest pipe. In

the swirling steam, the palikos appeared, his mud-gray face hardening with anger.

"You call me a TELEMARKETER?" he demanded. "We run a full-service PR firm!"

I doubled over and vomited in his crater, which I thought an appropriate response.

"Stop that!" Pete complained.

"I need to find Meg." I wiped my mouth with a shaky hand. "What would the myrmekes do with her?"

"I don't know!"

"Tell me or I will *not* complete your customer service survey."

Pete gasped. "That's terrible! Your feedback is important!" He floated down to my side. "Oh, dear…your head doesn't look good. You've got a big gash on your scalp, and there's blood. That must be why you're not thinking clearly."

"I don't care!" I yelled, which only made the pounding in my head worse. "Where is the myrmekes' nest?"

Pete wrung his steamy hands. "Well, that's what we were talking about earlier. That's where Paulie went. The nest is the only entrance."

"To what?"

"To the Grove of Dodona."

My stomach solidified into a pack of ice, which was unfair, because I needed one for my head. "The ant nest…is the way to the grove?"

"Look, you need medical attention. I *told* Paulie we should have a first-aid station for visitors." He fished around in his nonexistent pockets. "Let me just mark the location of the Apollo cabin—"

"If you pull out a brochure," I warned, "I will make you eat it. Now, explain how the nest leads to the grove."

Pete's face turned yellow, or perhaps that was just my vision getting worse. "Paulie didn't tell me everything. There's this thicket of woods that's grown so dense, nobody can get in. I mean, even from above, the branches are like…" He laced his muddy fingers, then caused them to liquefy and melt into one another, which made his point quite well.

"Anyway"—he pulled his hands apart—"the grove is in there. It could have been slumbering for centuries. Nobody on the board of directors even knew about it. Then, all of a sudden, the trees started whispering. Paulie figured those darned ants must have burrowed into the grove from underneath, and that's what woke it up."

I tried to make sense of that. It was difficult with a swollen brain. "Which way is the nest?"

“North of here,” Pete said. “Half a mile. But, man, you are in no shape—”

“I must! Meg needs me!”

Pete grabbed my arm. His grip was like a warm wet tourniquet. “She’s got time. If they carried her off in one piece, that means she’s not dead yet.”

“She will be soon enough!”

“Nah. Before Paulie…before he disappeared, he went into that nest a few times looking for the tunnel to the grove. He told me those myrmekes like to goop up their victims and let them, um, ripen until they’re soft enough for the hatchlings to eat.”

I made an un-godlike squeak. If there had been anything left in my stomach, I would have lost it. “How long does she have?”

“Twenty-four hours, give or take. Then she’ll start to…um, soften.”

It was difficult to imagine Meg McCaffrey softening under any circumstances, but I pictured her alone and scared, encased in insect goop, tucked in some larder of carcasses in the ants’ nest. For a girl who hated bugs—Oh, Demeter had been right to hate me and keep her children away from me. I was a terrible god!

“Go get some help,” Pete urged. “The Apollo cabin can heal that head wound. You’re not doing your friend any favors by charging after her and getting yourself killed.”

“Why do you care what happens to us?”

The geyser god looked offended. “Visitor satisfaction is always our top priority! Besides, if you find Paulie while you’re in there…”

I tried to stay angry at the palikos, but the loneliness and worry on his face mirrored my own feelings. “Did Paulie explain how to navigate the ants’ nest?”

Pete shook his head. “Like I said, he didn’t want me to follow him. The myrmekes are dangerous enough. And if those other guys are still wandering around—”

“Other guys?”

Pete frowned. “Didn’t I mention that? Yeah. Paulie saw three humans, heavily armed. They were looking for the grove too.”

My left leg started thumping nervously, as if it missed its three-legged race partner. “How did Paulie know what they were looking for?”

“He heard them talking in Latin.”

“*Latin?* Were they campers?”

Pete spread his hands. “I—I don’t think so. Paulie described them like they were adults. He said one of them was the leader. The other two addressed him as *imperator*.”

The entire planet seemed to tilt. “Imperator.”

“Yeah, you know, like in Rome—”

“Yes, I know.” Suddenly, too many things made sense. Pieces of the puzzle flew together, forming one huge picture that smacked me in the face. The Beast…Triumvirate Holdings…adult demigods completely off the radar.

It was all I could do to avoid pitching forward into the geyser. Meg needed me more than ever. But I would have to do this right. I would have to be careful—even more careful than when I gave the fiery horses of the sun their yearly vaccinations.

“Pete,” I said, “do you still oversee sacred oaths?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then hear my solemn oath!”

“Uh, the thing is, you’ve got this aura around you like you just *broke* a sacred oath, maybe one you swore on the River Styx? And if you break *another* oath with me—”

“I swear that I will save Meg McCaffrey. I will use every means at my disposal to bring her safely from the ants’ lair, and this oath supersedes any previous oath I have made. This I swear upon your sacred and extremely hot waters!”

Pete winced. “Well, okay. It’s done now. But keep in mind that if you don’t keep that oath, if Meg dies, even if it’s not your fault…you’ll face the consequences.”

“I am already cursed for breaking my earlier oath! What does it matter?”

“Yeah, but see, those River Styx oaths can take *years* to destroy you. They’re like cancer. My oaths…” Pete shrugged. “If you break it, there’s nothing I can do to stop your punishment. Wherever you are, a geyser will instantly blast through the ground at your feet and boil you alive.”

“Ah…” I tried to stop my knees from knocking. “Yes, of course I knew that. I stand by my oath.”

“You’ve got no choice now.”

“Right. I think I’ll—I’ll go get healed.”

I staggered off.

“Camp is the other direction,” Pete said.

I changed course.

“Remember to complete our survey online!” Pete called after me. “Just curious, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with the Woods at Camp Half-Blood?”

I didn’t reply. As I stumbled into the darkness, I was too busy contemplating, on a scale of one to ten, the pain I might have to endure in the near future.

I didn't have the strength to make it back to camp. The farther I walked, the clearer that became. My joints were pudding. I felt like a marionette, and as much as I'd enjoyed controlling mortals from above in the past, I did not relish being on the other end of the strings.

My defenses were at level zero. The smallest hellhound or dragon could have easily made a meal of the great Apollo. If an irritated badger had taken issue with me, I would have been doomed.

I leaned against a tree to catch my breath. The tree seemed to push me away, whispering in a voice I remembered so well: *Keep moving, Apollo. You can't rest here.*

"I loved you," I muttered.

Part of me knew I was delirious—imagining things only because of my concussion—but I swore I could see the face of my beloved Daphne rising from each tree trunk I passed, her features floating under the bark like a mirage of wood—her slightly crooked nose, her offset green eyes, those lips I had never kissed but never stopped dreaming of.

You loved every pretty girl, she scolded. *And every pretty boy, for that matter.*

"Not like you," I cried. "You were my first true love. Oh, Daphne!"

Wear my crown, she said. *And repent.*

I remembered chasing her—her lilac scent on the breeze, her lithe form flitting through the dappled light of the forest. I pursued her for what seemed like years. Perhaps it was.

For centuries afterward, I blamed Eros.

In a moment of recklessness, I had ridiculed Eros's archery skills. Out of spite, he struck me with a golden arrow. He bent all my love toward the beautiful Daphne, but that was not the worst of it. He also struck Daphne's heart with a lead arrow, leeching all possible affection she might have had for me.

What people do not understand: Eros's arrows can't summon emotion from nothing. They can only cultivate potential that is already there. Daphne and I could have been a perfect pair. She was my true love. She could have loved me back. Yet thanks to Eros, my love-o-meter was cranked to one hundred percent, while Daphne's feelings turned to pure hate (which is, of course, only the flip side of love). Nothing is more tragic than loving someone to the depths of your soul and knowing they cannot and will not ever love you back.

The stories say I chased her on a whim, that she was just another pretty dress. The stories are wrong. When she begged Gaea to turn her into a laurel tree in order to escape me, part of my heart hardened into bark as well. I invented the laurel wreath to commemorate my failure—to punish myself for the fate of my greatest love. Every time some hero wins the laurels, I am reminded of the girl I

can never win.

After Daphne, I swore I would never marry. Sometimes I claimed that was because I couldn't decide between the Nine Muses. A convenient story. The Nine Muses were my constant companions, all of them beautiful in their own way. But they never possessed my heart like Daphne did. Only one other person ever affected me so deeply—the perfect Hyacinthus—and he, too, was taken from me.

All these thoughts rambled through my bruised brain. I staggered from tree to tree, leaning against them, grabbing their lowest branches like handrails.

You cannot die here, Daphne whispered. *You have work to do. You made an oath.*

Yes, my oath. Meg needed me. I had to…

I fell face forward in the icy mulch.

How long I lay there, I'm not sure.

A warm snout breathed in my ear. A rough tongue lapped my face. I thought I was dead and Cerberus had found me at the gates of the Underworld.

Then the beast pushed me over onto my back. Dark tree branches laced the sky. I was still in the forest. The golden visage of a lion appeared above me, his amber eyes beautiful and deadly. He licked my face, perhaps trying to decide if I would make a good supper.

"Ptfh." I spit mane fur out of my mouth.

"Wake up," said a woman's voice, somewhere to my right. It wasn't Daphne, but it was vaguely familiar.

I managed to raise my head. Nearby, a second lion sat at the feet of a woman with tinted glasses and a silver-and-gold tiara in her braided hair. Her batik dress swirled with images of fern fronds. Her arms and hands were covered in henna tattoos. She looked different than she had in my dream, but I recognized her.

"Rhea," I croaked.

She inclined her head. "Peace, Apollo. I don't want to bum you out, but we need to talk."

26

Imperators here?
Gag me with a peace symbol
Not groovy, Mama

MY HEAD WOUND MUST have tasted like Wagyu beef.

The lion kept licking the side of my face, making my hair stickier and wetter. Strangely, this seemed to clear my thoughts. Perhaps lion saliva had curative properties. I guess I should have known that, being a god of healing, but you'll have to excuse me if I haven't done trial-and-error experiments with the drool of every single animal.

With difficulty, I sat up and faced the Titan queen.

Rhea leaned against the side of a VW safari van painted with swirling black frond designs like those on her dress. I seemed to recall that the black fern was one of Rhea's symbols, but I couldn't remember why. Among the gods, Rhea had always been something of a mystery. Even Zeus, who knew her best, did not often speak of her.

Her turret crown circled her brow like a glittering railroad track. When she looked down at me, her tinted glasses changed from orange to purple. A macramé belt cinched her waist, and on a chain around her neck hung her brass peace symbol.

She smiled. "Glad you're awake. I was worried, man."

I really wished people would stop calling me *man*. "Why are you…Where have you been all these centuries?"

"Upstate." She scratched her lion's ears. "After Woodstock, I stuck around, started a pottery studio."

"You…what?"

She tilted her head. "Was that last week or last millennium? I've lost track."

"I—I believe you're describing the 1960s. That was last century."

“Oh, bummer.” Rhea sighed. “I get mixed up after so many years.”

“I sympathize.”

“After I left Kronos…well, that man was so square, you could cut yourself on his corners, you know what I mean? He was the ultimate 1950s dad—wanted us to be Ozzie and Harriet or Lucy and Ricky or something.”

“He—he swallowed his children alive.”

“Yeah.” Rhea brushed her hair from her face. “That was some bad karma. Anyway, I left him. Back then divorce wasn’t cool. You just didn’t do it. But me, I burned my *apodesmos* and got liberated. I raised Zeus in a commune with a bunch of naiads and *kouretes*. Lots of wheat germ and nectar. The kid grew up with a strong Aquarian vibe.”

I was fairly sure Rhea was misremembering her centuries, but I thought it would be impolite to keep pointing that out.

“You remind me of Iris,” I said. “She went organic vegan several decades ago.”

Rhea made a face—just a ripple of disapproval before regaining her karmic balance. “Iris is a good soul. I dig her. But you know, these younger goddesses, they weren’t around to fight the revolution. They don’t get what it was like when your old man was eating your children and you couldn’t get a real job and the Titan chauvinists just wanted you to stay home and cook and clean and have more Olympian babies. And speaking of Iris…”

Rhea touched her forehead. “Wait, *were* we speaking of Iris? Or did I just have a flashback?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Oh, I remember now. She’s a messenger of the gods, right? Along with Hermes and that other groovy liberated chick…Joan of Arc?”

“Er, I’m not sure about that last one.”

“Well, anyway, the communication lines are down, man. Nothing works. Rainbow messages, flying scrolls, Hermes Express…it’s all going haywire.”

“We know this. But we don’t know why.”

“It’s *them.* They’re doing it.”

“Who?”

She glanced to either side. “The Man, man. Big Brother. The suits. The imperators.”

I had been hoping she would say something else: giants, Titans, ancient killing machines, aliens. I would’ve rather tangled with Tartarus or Ouranos or Primordial Chaos itself. I had hoped Pete the geyser misunderstood what his brother told him about the imperator in the ants’ nest.

Now that I had confirmation, I wanted to steal Rhea’s safari van and drive to

some commune far, far upstate.

"Triumvirate Holdings," I said.

"Yeah," Rhea agreed. "That's their new military-industrial complex. It's bumming me out in a big way."

The lion stopped licking my face, probably because my blood had turned bitter. "How is this possible? How have they come back?"

"They never went away," Rhea said. "They did it to themselves, you know. Wanted to make themselves gods. That never works out well. Ever since the old days they've been hiding out, influencing history from behind the curtains. They're stuck in a kind of twilight life. They can't die; they can't really live."

"But how could we not *know* about this?" I demanded. "We are gods!"

Rhea's laugh reminded me of a piglet with asthma. "Apollo, Grandson, beautiful child…Has being a god ever stopped someone from being stupid?"

She had a point. Not about me personally, of course, but the stories I could tell you about the *other* Olympians…

"The emperors of Rome." I tried to come to terms with the idea. "They can't *all* be immortal."

"No," Rhea said. "Just the worst of them, the most notorious. They live in human memory, man. That's what keeps them alive. Same as us, really. They're tied to the course of Western civilization, even though that whole concept is imperialist Eurocentric propaganda, man. Like my guru would tell you—"

"Rhea"—I put my hands against my throbbing temples—"can we stick to one problem at a time?"

"Yeah, okay. I didn't mean to blow your mind."

"But how can they affect our lines of communication? How can they be so powerful?"

"They've had centuries, Apollo. *Centuries.* All that time, plotting and making war, building up their capitalist empire, waiting for this moment when you are mortal, when the Oracles are vulnerable for a hostile takeover. It's just evil. They have no chill whatsoever."

"I thought that was a more modern term."

"Evil?"

"No. *Chill.* Never mind. The Beast…he is the leader?"

"Afraid so. He's as twisted as the others, but he's the smartest and the most stable—in a sociopathic homicidal way. You know who he is—who he was, right?"

Unfortunately, I did. I remembered where I had seen his smirking ugly face. I could hear his nasal voice echoing through the arena, ordering the execution of hundreds while the crowds cheered. I wanted to ask Rhea who his two

compatriots were in the Triumvirate, but I decided I could not bear the information at present. None of the options were good, and knowing their names might bring me more despair than I could handle.

"It's true, then," I said. "The other Oracles still exist. The emperors hold them all?"

"They're working on it. Python has Delphi—that's the biggest problem. But you won't have the strength to take him head-on. You've got to pry their fingers off the minor Oracles first, loosen their power. To do that, you need a new source of prophecy for this camp—an Oracle that is older and independent."

"Dodona," I said. "Your whispering grove."

"Right on," Rhea said. "I thought the grove was gone forever. But then—I don't know how—the oak trees regrew themselves in the heart of these woods. You have to find the grove and protect it."

"I'm working on that." I touched the sticky wound on the side of my face. "But my friend Meg—"

"Yeah. You had some setbacks. But there are always setbacks, Apollo. When Lizzy Stanton and I hosted the first women's rights convention in Woodstock—"

"I think you mean Seneca Falls?"

Rhea frowned. "Wasn't that in the '60s?"

"The '40s," I said. "The 1840s, if memory serves."

"So…Jimi Hendrix wasn't there?"

"Doubtful."

Rhea fiddled with her peace symbol. "Then who set that guitar on fire? Ah, never mind. The point is, you have to persevere. Sometimes change takes centuries."

"Except that I'm mortal now," I said. "I don't *have* centuries."

"But you have willpower," Rhea said. "You have mortal drive and urgency. Those are things the gods often lack."

At her side, her lion roared.

"I've gotta split," Rhea said. "If the imperators track me down—bad scene, man. I've been off the grid too long. I'm not going to get sucked into that patriarchal institutional oppression again. Just find Dodona. That's your first trial."

"And if the Beast finds the grove first?"

"Oh, he's already found the gates, but he'll never get through them without you and the girl."

"I—I don't understand."

"That's cool. Just breathe. Find your center. Enlightenment has to come from *within*."

It was very much like a line I would've given *my* worshippers. I was tempted to choke Rhea with her macramé belt, but I doubted I would have the strength. Also, she had two lions. "But what do I do? How do I save Meg?"

"First, get healed. Rest up. Then…well, how you save Meg is up to you. The journey is greater than the destination, you know?"

She held out her hand. Draped on her fingers was a set of wind chimes—a collection of hollow brass tubes and medallions engraved with ancient Greek and Cretan symbols. "Hang these in the largest ancient oak. That will help you focus the voices of the Oracle. If you get a prophecy, groovy. It'll only be the beginning, but without Dodona, nothing else will be possible. The emperors will suffocate our future and divide up the world. Only when you have defeated Python can you reclaim your rightful place on Olympus. My kid, Zeus…he's got this whole 'tough love' disciplinarian hang-up, you dig? Taking back Delphi is the only way you're going to get on his good side."

"I—I was afraid you would say that."

"There's one other thing," she warned. "The Beast is planning some kind of attack on your camp. I don't know what it is, but it's going to be big. Like, even worse than napalm. You have to warn your friends."

The nearest lion nudged me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and allowed him to pull me to my feet. I managed to remain standing, but only because my legs locked up in complete fright. For the first time, I understood the trials that awaited me. I knew the enemies I must face. I would need more than wind chimes and enlightenment. I'd need a miracle. And as a god, I can tell you that those are never distributed lightly.

"Good luck, Apollo." The Titan queen placed the wind chimes in my hands. "I've got to check my kiln before my pots crack. Keep on trucking, and save those trees!"

The woods dissolved. I found myself standing in the central green at Camp Half-Blood, face-to-face with Chiara Benvenuti, who jumped back in alarm. "Apollo?"

I smiled. "Hey, girl." My eyes rolled up in my head and, for the second time that week, I charmingly passed out in front of her.

27

I apologize
For pretty much everything
Wow, I'm a good guy

"WAKE," SAID A VOICE.

I opened my eyes and saw a ghost—his face just as precious to me as Daphne's. I knew his copper skin, his kind smile, the dark curls of his hair, and those eyes as purple as senatorial robes.

"Hyacinthus," I sobbed. "I'm so sorry…"

He turned his face toward the sunlight, revealing the ugly dent above his left ear where the discus had struck him. My own wounded face throbbed in sympathy.

"Seek the caverns," he said. "Near the springs of blue. Oh, Apollo…your sanity will be taken away, but do not…"

His image faded and began to retreat. I rose from my sickbed. I rushed after him and grabbed his shoulders. "Do not *what*? Please don't leave me again!"

My vision cleared. I found myself by the window in Cabin Seven, holding a ceramic pot of purple and red hyacinths. Nearby, looking very concerned, Will and Nico stood as if ready to catch me.

"He's talking to the flowers," Nico noted. "Is that normal?"

"Apollo," Will said, "you had a concussion. I healed you, but—"

"These hyacinths," I demanded. "Have they always been here?"

Will frowned. "Honestly, I don't know where they came from, but…" He took the flowerpot from my hands and set it back on the windowsill. "Let's worry about you, okay?"

Usually that would've been excellent advice, but now I could only stare at the hyacinths and wonder if they were some sort of message. How cruel to see them—the flowers that I had created to honor my fallen love, with their plumes

stained red like his blood or hued violet like his eyes. They bloomed so cheerfully in the window, reminding me of the joy I had lost.

Nico rested his hand on Will's shoulder. "Apollo, we were worried. Will was especially."

Seeing them together, supporting each other, made my heart feel even heavier. During my delirium, both of my great loves had visited me. Now, once again, I was devastatingly alone.

Still, I had a task to complete. A friend needed my help.

"Meg is in trouble," I said. "How long was I unconscious?"

Will and Nico glanced at each other.

"It's about noon now," Will said. "You showed up on the green around six this morning. When Meg didn't return with you, we wanted to search the woods for her, but Chiron wouldn't let us."

"Chiron was absolutely correct," I said. "I won't allow any others to put themselves at risk. But I must hurry. Meg has until tonight at the latest."

"Then what happens?" Nico asked.

I couldn't say it. I couldn't even *think* about it without losing my nerve. I looked down. Aside from Paolo's Brazilian-flag bandana and my ukulele-string necklace, I was wearing only my boxer shorts. My offensive flabbiness was on display for everyone to see, but I no longer cared about that. (Well, not much, anyway.) "I have to get dressed."

I staggered back to my cot. I fumbled through my meager supplies and found Percy Jackson's Led Zeppelin T-shirt. I tugged it on. It seemed more appropriate than ever.

Will hovered nearby. "Look, Apollo, I don't think you're back to a hundred percent."

"I'll be fine." I pulled on my jeans. "I have to save Meg."

"Let us help you," Nico said. "Tell us where she is and I can shadow-travel __"

"No!" I snapped. "No, you have to stay here and protect the camp."

Will's expression reminded me very much of his mother, Naomi—that look of trepidation she got just before she went onstage. "Protect the camp from what?"

"I—I'm not sure. You must tell Chiron the emperors have returned. Or rather, they never went away. They've been plotting, building their resources for centuries."

Nico's eyes glinted warily. "When you say emperors—"

"I mean the Roman ones."

Will stepped back. "You're saying the emperors of ancient Rome are alive?

How? The Doors of Death?"

"No." I could barely speak through the taste of bile. "The emperors made themselves gods. They had their own temples and altars. They encouraged the people to worship them."

"But that was just propaganda," Nico said. "They weren't really divine."

I laughed mirthlessly. "Gods are sustained by worship, son of Hades. They continue to exist because of the collective memories of a culture. It's true for the Olympians; it's also true for the emperors. Somehow, the most powerful of them have survived. All these centuries, they have clung to half-life, hiding, waiting to reclaim their power."

Will shook his head. "That's impossible. How—?"

"I don't know!" I tried to steady my breathing. "Tell Rachel the men behind Triumvirate Holdings are former emperors of Rome. They've been plotting against us all this time, and we gods have been blind. *Blind*."

I pulled on my coat. The ambrosia Nico had given me yesterday was still in the left pocket. In the right pocket, Rhea's wind chimes clanked, though I had no idea how they'd gotten there.

"The Beast is planning some sort of attack on the camp," I said. "I don't know what, and I don't know when, but tell Chiron you must be prepared. I have to go."

"Wait!" Will said as I reached the door. "Who is the Beast? Which emperor are we dealing with?"

"The worst of my descendants." My fingers dug into the doorframe. "The Christians called him the Beast because he burned them alive. Our enemy is Emperor Nero."

They must have been too stunned to follow me.

I ran toward the armory. Several campers gave me strange looks. Some called after me, offering help, but I ignored them. I could only think about Meg alone in the myrmekes' lair, and the visions I'd had of Daphne, Rhea, and Hyacinthus—all of them urging me onward, telling me to do the impossible in this inadequate mortal form.

When I reached the armory, I scanned the rack of bows. My hand trembling, I picked out the weapon Meg had tried to give me the day before. It was carved from mountain laurel wood. The bitter irony appealed to me.

I had sworn not to use a bow until I was a god again. But I had also sworn not to play music, and I had already broken that part of the oath in the most egregious, Neil-Diamondy way possible.

The curse of the River Styx could kill me in its slow cancerous way, or Zeus could strike me down. But my oath to save Meg McCaffrey had to come first.

I turned my face to the sky. “If you want to punish me, Father, be my guest, but have the courage to hurt *me* directly, not my mortal companion. BE A MAN!”

To my surprise, the skies remained silent. Lightning did not vaporize me. Perhaps Zeus was too taken aback to react, but I knew he would never overlook such an insult.

To Tartarus with him. I had work to do.

I grabbed a quiver and stuffed it with all the extra arrows I could find. Then I ran for the woods, Meg’s two rings jangling on my makeshift necklace. Too late, I realized I had forgotten my combat ukulele, but I had no time to turn back. My singing voice would have to be enough.

I’m not sure how I found the nest.

Perhaps the forest simply allowed me to reach it, knowing that I was marching to my death. I’ve found that when one is searching for danger, it’s never hard to find.

Soon I was crouched behind a fallen tree, studying the myrmekes’ lair in the clearing ahead. To call the place an anthill would be like calling Versailles Palace a single-family home. Earthen ramparts rose almost to the tops of the surrounding trees—a hundred feet at least. The circumference could have accommodated a Roman hippodrome. A steady stream of soldiers and drones swarmed in and out of the mound. Some carried fallen trees. One, inexplicably, was dragging a 1967 Chevy Impala.

How many ants would I be facing? I had no idea. After you reach the number *impossible*, there’s no point in counting.

I nocked an arrow and stepped into the clearing.

When the nearest myrmeke spotted me, he dropped his Chevy. He watched me approach, his antennae bobbing. I ignored him and strolled past, heading for the nearest tunnel entrance. That confused him even more.

Several other ants gathered to watch.

I’ve learned that if you act like you are supposed to be somewhere, most people (or ants) will not confront you. Normally, acting confident isn’t a problem for me. Gods are allowed to be anywhere. It was a bit tougher for Lester Papadopoulos, dork teen extraordinaire, but I made it all the way to the nest without being challenged.

I plunged inside and began to sing.

This time I needed no ukulele. I needed no muse for my inspiration. I remembered Daphne’s face in the trees. I remembered Hyacinthus turning away,

his death wound glistening on his scalp. My voice filled with anguish. I sang of heartbreak. Rather than collapsing under my own despair, I projected it outward.

The tunnels amplified my voice, carrying it through the nest, making the entire hill my musical instrument.

Each time I passed an ant, it curled its legs and touched its forehead to the floor, its antennae quivering from the vibrations of my voice.

Had I been a god, the song would have been stronger, but this was enough. I was impressed by how much sorrow a human voice could convey.

I wandered deeper into the hill. I had no idea where I was going until I spotted a geranium blooming from the tunnel floor.

My song faltered.

Meg. She must have regained consciousness. She had dropped one of her emergency seeds to leave me a trail. The geranium's purple flowers all faced a smaller tunnel leading off to the left.

"Clever girl," I said, choosing that tunnel.

A clattering sound alerted me to the approaching myrmeke.

I turned and raised my bow. Freed from the enchantment of my voice, the insect charged, its mouth foaming with acid. I drew and fired. The arrow embedded itself up to the fletching in the ant's forehead.

The creature dropped, its back legs twitching in death throes. I tried to retrieve my arrow, but the shaft snapped in my hand, the broken end covered in steaming corrosive goo. So much for reusing ammunition.

I called, "MEG!"

The only answer was the clattering of more giant ants moving in my direction. I began to sing again. Now, though, I had higher hopes of finding Meg, which made it difficult to summon the proper amount of melancholy. The ants I encountered were no longer catatonic. They moved slowly and unsteadily, but they still attacked. I was forced to shoot one after another.

I passed a cave filled with glittering treasure, but I was not interested in shiny things at the moment. I kept moving.

At the next intersection, another geranium sprouted from the floor, all its flowers facing right. I turned that direction, calling Meg's name again, then returning to my song.

As my spirits lifted, my song became less effective and the ants more aggressive. After a dozen kills, my quiver was growing dangerously light.

I had to reach deeper into my feelings of despair. I had to get the blues, good and proper.

For the first time in four thousand years, I sang of my own faults.

I poured out my guilt about Daphne's death. My boastfulness, envy, and

desire had caused her destruction. When she ran from me, I should have let her go. Instead, I chased her relentlessly. I wanted her, and I intended to have her. Because of that, I had left Daphne no choice. To escape me, she sacrificed her life and turned into a tree, leaving my heart scarred forever….But it was *my* fault. I apologized in song. I begged Daphne's forgiveness.

I sang of Hyacinthus, the most handsome of men. The West Wind Zephyros had also loved him, but I refused to share even a moment of Hyacinthus's time. In my jealousy, I threatened Zephyros. I dared him, *dared* him to interfere.

I sang of the day Hyacinthus and I played discus in the fields, and how the West Wind blew my disc off course—right into the side of Hyacinthus's head.

To keep Hyacinthus in the sunlight where he belonged, I created hyacinth flowers from his blood. I held Zephyros accountable, but my own petty greed had caused Hyacinthus's death. I poured out my sorrow. I took all the blame.

I sang of my failures, my eternal heartbreak and loneliness. I was the worst of the gods, the most guilt-ridden and unfocused. I couldn't commit myself to one lover. I couldn't even choose what to be the god of. I kept shifting from one skill to another—distracted and dissatisfied.

My golden life was a sham. My coolness was pretense. My heart was a lump of petrified wood.

All around me, myrmekes collapsed. The nest itself trembled with grief.

I found a third geranium, then a fourth.

Finally, pausing between verses, I heard a small voice up ahead: the sound of a girl crying.

"Meg!" I gave up on my song and ran.

She lay in the middle of a cavernous food larder, just as I had imagined. Around her were stacked the carcasses of animals—cows, deer, horses—all sheathed in hardened goop and slowly decaying. The smell hit my nasal passages like an avalanche.

Meg was also enveloped, but she was fighting back with the power of geraniums. Patches of leaves sprouted from the thinnest parts of her cocoon. A frilly collar of flowers kept the goo away from her face. She had even managed to free one of her arms, thanks to an explosion of pink geraniums at her left armpit.

Her eyes were puffy from crying. I assumed she was frightened, possibly in pain, but when I knelt next to her, her first words were, "I'm so sorry."

I brushed a tear from the tip of her nose. "Why, dear Meg? You did nothing wrong. I failed *you*."

A sob caught in her throat. "You don't understand. That song you were singing. Oh, gods…Apollo, if I'd known—"

“Hush, now.” My throat was so raw I could barely talk. The song had almost destroyed my voice. “You’re just reacting to the grief in the music. Let’s get you free.”

I was considering how to do that when Meg’s eyes widened. She made a whimpering sound.

The hairs on the nape of my neck came to attention. “There are ants behind me, aren’t there?” I asked.

Meg nodded.

I turned as four of them entered the cavern. I reached for my quiver. I had one arrow left.

28

Parenting advice:
Mamas, don't let your larvae
Grow up to be ants

MEG THRASHED IN HER GOO CASE. "Get me out of here!"

"I don't have a blade!" My fingers crept to the ukulele string around my neck. "Actually I have *your* blades, I mean your rings—"

"You don't need to cut me out. When the ant dumped me here, I dropped the packet of seeds. It should be close."

She was right. I spotted the crumpled pouch near her feet.

I inched toward it, keeping one eye on the ants. They stood together at the entrance as if hesitant to come closer. Perhaps the trail of dead ants leading to this room had given them pause.

"Nice ants," I said. "Excellent calm ants."

I crouched and scooped up the packet. A quick glance inside told me half a dozen seeds remained. "Now what, Meg?"

"Throw them on the goo," Meg said.

I gestured to the geraniums bursting from her neck and armpit. "How many seeds did that?"

"One."

"Then this many will choke you to death. I've turned too many people I cared about into flowers, Meg. I won't—"

"JUST DO IT!"

The ants did not like her tone. They advanced, snapping their mandibles. I shook the geranium seeds over Meg's cocoon, then nocked my arrow. Killing one ant would do no good if the other three tore us apart, so I chose a different target. I shot the roof of the cavern, just above the ants' heads.

It was a desperate idea, but I'd had success bringing down buildings with

arrows before. In 464 BCE, I caused an earthquake that wiped out most of Sparta by hitting a fault line at the right angle. (I never liked the Spartans much.)

This time, I had less luck. The arrow embedded itself in the packed earth with a dull *thunk.* The ants took another step forward, acid dripping from their mouths. Behind me, Meg struggled to free herself from her cocoon, which was now covered in a shag carpet of purple flowers.

She needed more time.

Out of ideas, I tugged my Brazilian-flag handkerchief from my neck and waved it like a maniac, trying to channel my inner Paolo.

"BACK, FOUL ANTS!" I yelled. *"BRASIL!"*

The ants wavered—perhaps because of the bright colors, or my voice, or my sudden insane confidence. While they hesitated, cracks spread across the roof from my arrow's impact site, and then thousands of tons of earth collapsed on top of the myrmekes.

When the dust cleared, half the room was gone, along with the ants.

I looked at my handkerchief. "I'll be Styxed. It *does* have magic power. I can never tell Paolo about this or he'll be insufferable."

"Over here!" Meg yelled.

I turned. Another myrmeke was crawling over a pile of carcasses—apparently from a second exit I had failed to notice behind the disgusting food stores.

Before I could think what to do, Meg roared and burst from her cage, spraying geraniums in every direction. She shouted, "My rings!"

I yanked them from my neck and tossed them through the air. As soon as Meg caught them, two golden scimitars flashed into her hands.

The myrmeke barely had time to think *Uh-oh* before Meg charged. She sliced off his armored head. His body collapsed in a steaming heap.

Meg turned to me. Her face was a tempest of guilt, misery, and bitterness. I was afraid she might use her swords on me.

"Apollo, I…" Her voice broke.

I supposed she was still suffering from the effects of my song. She was shaken to her core. I made a mental note never again to sing so honestly when a mortal might be listening.

"It's all right, Meg," I said. "I should be apologizing to you. I got you into this mess."

Meg shook her head. "You don't understand. I—"

An enraged shriek echoed through the chamber, shaking the compromised ceiling and raining clods of dirt on our heads. The tone of the scream reminded me of Hera whenever she stormed through the hallways of Olympus, yelling at

me for leaving the godly toilet seat up.

"That's the queen ant," I guessed. "We need to leave."

Meg pointed her sword toward the room's only remaining exit. "But the sound came from there. We'll be walking in her direction."

"Exactly. So perhaps we should hold off on making amends with each other, eh? We might still get each other killed."

We found the queen ant.

Hooray.

All corridors must have led to the queen. They radiated from her chamber like spikes on a morning star. Her Majesty was three times the size of her largest soldiers—a towering mass of black chitin and barbed appendages, with diaphanous oval wings folded against her back. Her eyes were glassy swimming pools of onyx. Her abdomen was a pulsing translucent sac filled with glowing eggs. The sight of it made me regret ever inventing gel capsule medications.

Her swollen abdomen might slow her down in a fight, but she was so large, she could intercept us before we reached the nearest exit. Those mandibles would snap us in half like dried twigs.

"Meg," I said, "how do you feel about dual-wielding scimitars against this lady?"

Meg looked appalled. "She's a mother giving birth."

"Yes…and she's an insect, which you hate. And her children were ripening you up for dinner."

Meg frowned. "Still…I don't feel right about it."

The queen hissed—a dry spraying noise. I imagined she would have already hosed us down with acid if she weren't worried about the long-term effects of corrosives on her larvae. Queen ants can't be too careful these days.

"You have another idea?" I asked Meg. "Preferably one that does not involve dying?"

She pointed to a tunnel directly behind the queen's clutch of eggs. "We need to go that way. It leads to the grove."

"How can you be sure?"

Meg tilted her head. "Trees. It's like…I can hear them growing."

That reminded me of something the Muses once told me—how they could actually hear the ink drying on new pages of poetry. I suppose it made sense that a daughter of Demeter could hear the growth of plants. Also, it didn't surprise me that the tunnel we needed was the most dangerous one to reach.

"Sing," Meg told me. "Sing like you did before."

“I—I can’t. My voice is almost gone.”

Besides, I thought, I don’t want to risk losing you again.

I had freed Meg, so perhaps I’d fulfilled my oath to Pete the geyser god. Still, by singing and practicing archery, I had broken my oath upon the River Styx not once but twice. More singing would only make me *more* of a scofflaw. Whatever cosmic punishments awaited me, I did not want them to fall on Meg.

Her Majesty snapped at us—a warning shot, telling us to back off. A few feet closer and my head would have rolled in the dirt.

I burst into song—or rather, I did the best I could with the raspy voice that remained. I began to rap. I started with the rhythm *boom chicka chicka*. I busted out some footwork the Nine Muses and I had been working on just before the war with Gaea.

The queen arched her back. I don’t think she had expected to be rapped to today.

I gave Meg a look that clearly meant *Help me out!*

She shook her head. Give the girl two swords and she was a maniac. Ask her to lay down a simple beat and she suddenly got stage fright.

Fine, I thought. I’ll do it by myself.

I launched into “Dance” by Nas, which I have to say was one of the most moving odes to mothers that I ever inspired an artist to write. (You’re welcome, Nas.) I took some liberties with the lyrics. I may have changed *angel* to *brood mother* and *woman* to *insect*. But the sentiment remained. I serenaded the pregnant queen, channeling my love for my own dear mother, Leto. When I sang that I could only wish to marry a woman (or insect) so fine someday, my heartbreak was real. I would never have such a partner. It was not in my destiny.

The queen’s antennae quivered. Her head seesawed back and forth. Eggs kept extruding from her abdomen, which made it difficult for me to concentrate, but I persevered.

When I was done, I dropped to one knee and held up my arms in tribute, waiting for the queen’s verdict. Either she would kill me or she would not. I was spent. I had poured everything into that song and could not rap another line.

Next to me, Meg stood very still, gripping her swords.

Her Majesty shuddered. She threw back her head and wailed—a sound more brokenhearted than angry.

She leaned down and gently nudged my chest, pushing me in the direction of the tunnel we needed.

“Thank you,” I croaked. “I—I’m sorry about the ants I killed.”

The queen purred and clicked, extruding a few more eggs as if to say, *Don’t worry; I can always make more.*

I stroked the queen ant's forehead. "May I call you Mama?"

Her mouth frothed in a pleased sort of way.

"Apollo," Meg urged, "let's go before she changes her mind."

I was not sure Mama *would* change her mind. I got the feeling she had accepted my fealty and adopted us into her brood. But Meg was right; we needed to hurry. Mama watched as we edged around her clutch of eggs.

We plunged into the tunnel and saw the glow of daylight above us.

29

Nightmares of torches
And a man in purple clothes
But that's not the worst

I HAD NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY to see a killing field.

We emerged into a glade littered with bones. Most were from forest animals. A few appeared human. I guessed we had found the myrmekes' dumping site, and they apparently didn't get regular garbage pickup.

The clearing was hemmed with trees so thick and tangled that traveling through them would've been impossible. Over our heads, the branches wove together in a leafy dome that let in sunlight but not much else. Anyone flying above the forest would never have realized this open space existed under the canopy.

At the far end of the glade stood a row of objects like football tackle dummies—six white cocoons staked on tall wooden poles, flanking a pair of enormous oaks. Each tree was at least eighty feet tall. They had grown so close together that their massive trunks appeared to have fused. I had the distinct impression I was looking at a set of living doors.

"It's a gateway," I said. "To the Grove of Dodona."

Meg's blades retracted, once again becoming gold rings on her middle fingers. "Aren't we *in* the grove?"

"No…" I stared across the clearing at the white cocoon Popsicles. They were too far away to make out clearly, but something about them seemed familiar in an evil, unwelcome sort of way. I wanted to get closer. I also wanted to keep my distance.

"I think this is more of an antechamber," I said. "The grove itself is behind those trees."

Meg gazed warily across the field. "I don't hear any voices."

It was true. The forest was absolutely quiet. The trees seemed to be holding their breath.

"The grove knows we are here," I guessed. "It's waiting to see what we'll do."

"We'd better do something, then." Meg didn't sound any more excited than I was, but she marched forward, bones crunching under her feet.

I wished I had more than a bow, an empty quiver, and a hoarse voice to defend myself with, but I followed, trying not to trip over rib cages and deer antlers. About halfway across the glade, Meg let out a sharp exhale.

She was staring at the posts on either side of the tree gates.

At first I couldn't process what I was seeing. Each stake was about the height of a crucifix—the kind Romans used to set up along the roadside to advertise the fates of criminals. (Personally, I find modern billboards much more tasteful.) The upper half of each post was wrapped in thick lumpy wads of white cloth, and sticking from the top of each cocoon was something that looked like a human head.

My stomach somersaulted. They *were* human heads. Arrayed in front of us were the missing demigods, all tightly bound. I watched, petrified, until I discerned the slightest expansions and contractions in the wrappings around their chests. They were still breathing. Unconscious, not dead. Thank the gods.

On the left were three teenagers I didn't know, though I assumed they must be Cecil, Ellis, and Miranda. On the right side was an emaciated man with gray skin and white hair—no doubt the geyser god Paulie. Next to him hung my children…Austin and Kayla.

I shook so violently, the bones around my feet clattered. I recognized the smell coming from the prisoners' wrappings—sulfur, oil, powdered lime, and liquid Greek fire, the most dangerous substance ever created. Rage and disgust fought in my throat, vying for the right to make me throw up.

"Oh, monstrous," I said. "We need to free them immediately."

"Wh-what's wrong with them?" Meg stammered.

I dared not put it into words. I had seen this form of execution once before, at the hands of the Beast, and I never wished to see it again.

I ran to Austin's stake. With all my strength I tried to push it over, but it wouldn't budge. The base was sunk too deep in the earth. I tore at the cloth bindings but only managed to coat my hands in sulfurous resin. The wadding was stickier and harder than myrmekes' goo.

"Meg, your swords!" I wasn't sure they would do any good either, but I could think of nothing else to try.

Then from above us came a familiar snarl.

The branches rustled. Peaches the karpos dropped from the canopy, landing with a somersault at Meg's feet. He looked like he'd been through quite an ordeal to get here. His arms were sliced up and dripping peach nectar. His legs were dotted with bruises. His diaper sagged dangerously.

"Thank the gods!" I said. That was not my usual reaction when I saw the grain spirit, but his teeth and claws might be just the things to free the demigods. "Meg, hurry! Order your friend to—"

"Apollo." Her voice was heavy. She pointed to the tunnel from which we'd come.

Emerging from the ants' nest were two of the largest humans I had ever seen. Each was seven feet tall and perhaps three hundred pounds of pure muscle stuffed into horsehide armor. Their blond hair glinted like silver floss. Jeweled rings glittered in their beards. Each man carried an oval shield and a spear, though I doubted they needed weapons to kill. They looked like they could crack open cannonballs with their bare hands.

I recognized them from their tattoos and the circular designs on their shields. Such warriors weren't easy to forget.

"Germani." Instinctively, I moved in front of Meg. The elite imperial bodyguards had been cold-blooded death reapers in ancient Rome. I doubted they'd gotten any sweeter over the centuries.

The two men glared at me. They had serpent tattoos curling around their necks, just like the ruffians who had jumped me in New York. The Germani parted, and their master climbed from the tunnel.

Nero hadn't changed much in one thousand nine hundred and some-odd years. He appeared to be no more than thirty, but it was a *hard* thirty, his face haggard and his belly distended from too much partying. His mouth was fixed in a permanent sneer. His curly hair extended into a wraparound neck beard. His chin was so weak, I was tempted to create a GoFundMe campaign to buy him a better jaw.

He tried to compensate for his ugliness with an expensive Italian suit of purple wool, his gray shirt open to display gold chains. His shoes were hand-tooled leather, not the sort of thing to wear while stomping around in an ant pile. Then again, Nero had always had expensive, impractical tastes. That was perhaps the only thing I admired about him.

"Emperor Nero," I said. "The Beast."

He curled his lip. "Nero will do. It's good to see you, my honored ancestor. I'm sorry I've been so lax about my offerings during the past few millennia, but"—he shrugged—"I haven't needed you. I've done rather well on my own."

My fists clenched. I wanted to strike down this pot-bellied emperor with a

bolt of white-hot power, except that I had no bolts of white-hot power. I had no arrows. I had no singing voice left. Against Nero and his seven-foot-tall bodyguards, I had a Brazilian handkerchief, a packet of ambrosia, and some brass wind chimes.

"It's me you want," I said. "Cut these demigods down from their stakes. Let them leave with Meg. They've done nothing to you."

Nero chuckled. "I'll be happy to let them go once we've come to an agreement. As for Meg…" He smiled at her. "How are you, my dear?"

Meg said nothing. Her face was as hard and gray as a geyser god's. At her feet, Peaches snarled and rustled his leafy wings.

One of Nero's guards said something in his ear.

The Emperor nodded. "Soon."

He turned his attention back to me. "But where are my manners? Allow me to introduce my right hand, Vincius, and my left hand, Garius."

The bodyguards pointed across to each other.

"Ah, sorry," Nero corrected. "My right hand, Garius, and my left hand, Vincius. Those are the Romanized versions of their Batavi names, which I can't pronounce. Usually I just call them Vince and Gary. Say hello, boys."

Vince and Gary glowered at me.

"They have serpent tattoos," I noted, "like those street thugs you sent to attack me."

Nero shrugged. "I have many servants. Cade and Mikey are quite low on the pay scale. Their only job was to rattle you a bit, welcome you to my city."

"*Your* city." I found it just like Nero to go claiming major metropolitan areas that clearly belonged to me. "And these two gentlemen…they are actually Germani from the ancient times? How?"

Nero made a snide little barking sound in the back of his nose. I'd forgotten how much I hated his laugh.

"Lord Apollo, please," he said. "Even before Gaea commandeered the Doors of Death, souls escaped from Erebos all the time. It was quite easy for a god-emperor such as myself to call back my followers."

"A god-emperor?" I growled. "You mean a delusional ex-emperor."

Nero arched his eyebrows. "What made *you* a god, Apollo…back when you were one? Wasn't it the power of your name, your sway over those who believed in you? I am no different." He glanced to his left. "Vince, fall on your spear, please."

Without hesitation, Vince planted the butt of his spear against the ground. He braced the point under his rib cage.

"Stop," Nero said. "I changed my mind."

Vince betrayed no relief. In fact, his eyes tightened with faint disappointment. He brought his spear back to his side.

Nero grinned at me. “You see? I hold the power of life and death over my worshippers, like any proper god should.”

I felt like I’d swallowed some gel capsule larvae. “The Germani were always crazy, much like you.”

Nero put his hand to his chest. “I’m hurt! My barbarian friends are loyal subjects of the Julian dynasty! And, of course, we are all descended from you, Lord Apollo.”

I didn’t need the reminder. I’d been so proud of my son, the original Octavian, later Caesar Augustus. After his death, his descendants became increasingly arrogant and unstable (which I blamed on their mortal DNA; they certainly didn’t get those qualities from me). Nero had been the last of the Julian line. I had not wept when he died. Now here he was, as grotesque and chinless as ever.

Meg stood at my shoulder. “Wh-what do you want, Nero?”

Considering she was facing the man who killed her father, she sounded remarkably calm. I was grateful for her strength. It gave me hope to have a skilled dimachaerus and a ravenous peach baby at my side. Still, I did not like our odds against two Germani.

Nero’s eyes gleamed. “Straight to the point. I’ve always admired that about you, Meg. Really, it’s simple. You and Apollo will open the gates of Dodona for me. Then these six”—he gestured to the staked prisoners—“will be released.”

I shook my head. “You’ll destroy the grove. Then you’ll kill us.”

The emperor made that horrible bark again. “Not unless you force me to. I’m a reasonable god-emperor, Apollo! I’d much rather have the Grove of Dodona under my control if it can be managed, but I certainly can’t allow *you* to use it. You had your chance at being the guardian of the Oracles. You failed miserably. Now it’s my responsibility. Mine…and my partners’.”

“The two other emperors,” I said. “Who are they?”

Nero shrugged. “Good Romans—men who, like me, have the willpower to do what is needed.”

“Triumvirates have never worked. They always lead to civil war.”

He smiled as if that idea did not bother him. “The three of us have come to an agreement. We have divided up the new empire…by which I mean North America. Once we have the Oracles, we’ll expand and do what Romans have always done best—conquer the world.”

I could only stare at him. “You truly learned nothing from your previous reign.”

“Oh, but I did! I’ve had centuries to reflect, plan, and prepare. Do you have any idea how annoying it is to be a god-emperor, unable to die but unable to fully live? There was a period of about three hundred years during the Middle Ages when my name was almost forgotten. I was little more than a mirage! Thank goodness for the Renaissance, when our Classical greatness was remembered. And then came the Internet. Oh, gods, I *love* the Internet! It is impossible for me to fade completely now. I am immortal on Wikipedia!”

I winced. I was now fully convinced of Nero’s insanity. Wikipedia was always getting stuff wrong about me.

He rolled his hand. “Yes, yes. You think I am crazy. I could explain my plans and prove otherwise, but I have a lot on my plate today. I need you and Meg to open those gates. They’ve resisted my best efforts, but together you two can do it. Apollo, you have an affinity with Oracles. Meg has a way with trees. Get to it. Please and thank you.”

“We would rather die,” I said. “Wouldn’t we, Meg?”

No response.

I glanced over. A silvery streak glistened on Meg’s cheek. At first I thought one of her rhinestones had melted. Then I realized she was crying.

“Meg?”

Nero clasped his hands as if in prayer. “Oh, my. It seems we’ve had a slight miscommunication. You see, Apollo, Meg brought you here, just as I asked her to. Well done, my sweet.”

Meg wiped her face. “I—I didn’t mean…”

My heart compressed to the size of a pebble. “Meg, no. I can’t believe—”

I reached for her. Peaches snarled and inserted himself between us. I realized the karpos was not here to protect us from Nero. He was defending Meg from *me*.

“Meg?” I said. “This man killed your father! He’s a murderer!”

She stared at the ground. When she spoke, her voice was even more tortured than mine was when I sang in the anthill. “The *Beast* killed my father. This is Nero. He’s—he’s my stepfather.”

I could not fully grasp this before Nero spread his arms.

“That’s right, my darling,” he said. “And you’ve done a wonderful job. Come to Papa.”

30

I school McCaffrey
Yo, girl, your stepdad is wack
Why won't she listen?

I HAD BEEN BETRAYED BEFORE.

The memories came flooding back to me in a painful tide. Once, my former girlfriend Cyrene took up with Ares just to get back at me. Another time, Artemis shot me in the groin because I was flirting with her Hunters. In 1928, Alexander Fleming failed to give me credit for inspiring his discovery of penicillin. I mean, *ouch*. That stung.

But I couldn't remember *ever* being so wrong about someone as I had been about Meg. Well…at least not since Irving Berlin. *"Alexander's Ragtime Band"?* I remember telling him. *You'll never make it big with a corny song like that!*

"Meg, we are friends." My voice sounded petulant even to myself. "How could you do this to me?"

Meg looked down at her red sneakers—the primary-colored shoes of a traitor. "I tried to tell you, to warn you."

"She has a good heart." Nero smiled. "But, Apollo, you and Meg have been friends for just a few days—and only because I *asked* Meg to befriend you. I have been Meg's stepfather, protector, and caretaker for years. She is a member of the Imperial Household."

I stared at my beloved Dumpster waif. Yes, somehow over the past week she had become beloved to me. I could not imagine her as Imperial *anything*—definitely not as a part of Nero's entourage.

"I risked my life for you," I said in amazement. "And that actually *means* something, because I can die!"

Nero clapped politely. "We're all impressed, Apollo. Now, if you'd open the

gates. They've defied me for too long."

I tried to glare at Meg, but my heart wasn't in it. I felt too hurt and vulnerable. We gods do not like feeling vulnerable. Besides, Meg wasn't even looking at me.

In a daze, I turned to the oak tree gates. I saw now that their fused trunks were marred from Nero's previous efforts—chain-saw scars, burn marks, bites from ax blades, even some bullet holes. All these had barely chipped the outer bark. The most damaged area was an inch-deep impression in the shape of a human hand, where the wood had bubbled and peeled away. I glanced at the unconscious face of Paulie the geyser god, strung up and bound with the five demigods.

"Nero, what have you done?"

"Oh, a number of things! We found a way into this antechamber weeks ago. The Labyrinth has a convenient opening in the myrmekes' nest. But getting through these gates—"

"You forced the palikos to help you?" I had to restrain myself from throwing my wind chimes at the emperor. "You used a nature spirit to destroy nature? Meg, how can you tolerate this?"

Peaches growled. For once I had the feeling that the grain spirit might be in agreement with me. Meg's expression was as closed up as the gates. She stared intently at the bones littering the field.

"Come now," Nero said. "Meg knows there are good nature spirits, and bad ones. This geyser god was annoying. He kept asking us to fill out surveys. Besides, he shouldn't have ventured so far from his source of power. He was quite easy to capture. His steam, as you can see, didn't do us much good anyway."

"And the five demigods?" I demanded. "Did you 'use' them, too?"

"Of course. I didn't plan on luring them here, but every time we attacked the gates, the grove started wailing. I suppose it was calling for help, and the demigods couldn't resist. The first to wander in was this one." He pointed to Cecil Markowitz. "The last two were your own children—Austin and Kayla, yes? They showed up after we forced Paulie to steam-broil the trees. I guess the grove was quite nervous about that attempt. We got two demigods for the price of one!"

I lost control. I let out a guttural howl and charged the emperor, intending to wring his hairy excuse for a neck. The Germani would have killed me before I ever got that far, but I was saved the indignity. I tripped over a human pelvis and belly-surfed through the bones.

"Apollo!" Meg ran toward me.

I rolled over and kicked at her like a fussy child. “I don’t need *your* help! Don’t you understand who your protector is? He’s a monster! He’s the emperor who—”

“Don’t say it,” Nero warned. “If you say ‘who fiddled while Rome burned,’ I will have Vince and Gary flay you for a set of hide armor. You know as well as I do, Apollo, we didn’t *have* fiddles back then. And I did *not* start the Great Fire of Rome.”

I struggled to my feet. “But you profited from it.”

Facing Nero, I remembered all the tawdry details of his rule—the extravagance and cruelty that had made him so embarrassing to me, his forefather. Nero was that relative you never wanted to invite to Lupercalia dinner.

“Meg,” I said, “your stepfather watched as seventy percent of Rome was destroyed. Tens of thousands died.”

“I was thirty miles away in Antium!” Nero snarled. “I rushed back to the city and personally led the fire brigades!”

“Only when the fire threatened your palace.”

Nero rolled his eyes. “I can’t help it if I arrived just in time to save the most important building!”

Meg cupped her hands over her ears. “Stop arguing. Please.”

I didn’t stop. Talking seemed better than my other options, like helping Nero or dying.

“After the Great Fire,” I told her, “instead of rebuilding the houses on Palatine Hill, Nero leveled the neighborhood and built a new palace—the Domus Aurea.”

Nero got a dreamy look on his face. “Ah, yes…the House of Gold. It was beautiful, Meg! I had my own lake, three hundred rooms, frescoes of gold, mosaics done in pearls and diamonds—I could finally live like a human being!”

“You had the nerve to put a hundred-foot-tall bronze statue in your front lawn!” I said. “A statue of yourself as Sol-Apollo, the sun god. In other words, you claimed to be *me*.”

“Indeed,” Nero agreed. “Even after I died, that statue lived on. I understand it became famous as the Colossus of Nero! They moved it to the gladiators’ amphitheater and everyone began calling the theater after the statue—*the Colosseum*.” Nero puffed up his chest. “Yes…the statue was the perfect choice.”

His tone sounded even more sinister than usual.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing.” He checked his watch…a mauve-and-gold Rolex. “The point is, I had style! The people loved me!”

I shook my head. “They turned against you. The people of Rome were sure you’d started the Great Fire, so you scapegoated the Christians.”

I was aware that this arguing was pointless. If Meg had hidden her true identity all this time, I doubted I could change her mind now. But perhaps I could stall long enough for the cavalry to arrive. If only I *had* a cavalry.

Nero waved dismissively. “But the Christians were terrorists, you see. Perhaps they didn’t start the fire, but they were causing all sorts of other trouble. I recognized that before anyone else!”

“He fed them to the lions,” I told Meg. “He burned them as human torches, the way he will burn these six.”

Meg’s face turned green. She gazed at the unconscious prisoners on the stakes. “Nero, you wouldn’t—”

“They will be released,” Nero promised, “as long as Apollo cooperates.”

“Meg, you can’t trust him,” I said. “The last time he did this, he strung up Christians all over his backyard and burned them to illuminate his garden party. I was there. I remember the screaming.”

Meg clutched her stomach.

“My dear, don’t believe his stories!” Nero said. “That was just propaganda invented by my enemies.”

Meg studied the face of Paulie the geyser god. “Nero…you didn’t say anything about making them into torches.”

“They won’t burn,” he said, straining to soften his voice. “It won’t come to that. The Beast will not have to act.”

“You see, Meg?” I wagged a finger at the emperor. “It’s never a good sign when someone starts referring to himself in the third person. Zeus used to scold me about that constantly!”

Vince and Gary stepped forward, their knuckles whitening on their spears.

“I would be careful,” Nero warned. “My Germani are sensitive about insults to the Imperial person. Now, as much as I love talking about myself, we’re on a schedule.” He checked his watch again. “You’ll open the gates. Then Meg will see if she can use the trees to interpret the future. If so, wonderful! If not…well, we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

“Meg,” I said, “he’s a madman.”

At her feet, Peaches hissed protectively.

Meg’s chin quivered. “Nero cared about me, Apollo. He gave me a home. He taught me to fight.”

“You said he killed your father!”

“No!” She shook her head adamantly, a look of panic in her eyes. “No, that’s not what I said. The *Beast* killed him.”

“But—”

Nero snorted. “Oh, Apollo…you understand so little. Meg’s father was weak. She doesn’t even remember him. He couldn’t protect her. *I* raised her. I kept her alive.”

My heart sank even further. I did not understand everything Meg had been through, or what she was feeling now, but I knew Nero. I saw how easily he could have twisted a scared child’s understanding of the world—a little girl all alone, yearning for safety and acceptance after her father’s murder, even if that acceptance came from her father’s killer. “Meg…I am so sorry.”

Another tear traced her cheek.

“She doesn’t NEED sympathy.” Nero’s voice turned as hard as bronze. “Now, my dear, if you would be so kind, open the gates. If Apollo objects, remind him that he is bound to follow your orders.”

Meg swallowed. “Apollo, don’t make it harder. Please…help me open the gates.”

I shook my head. “Not by choice.”

“Then I—I command you. Help me. Now.”

31

Listen to the trees
The trees know what is up, yo
They know all the things

MEG'S RESOLVE may have been wavering, but Peaches's was not.

When I hesitated to follow Meg's orders, the grain spirit bared his fangs and hissed, "Peaches," as if that was a new torture technique.

"Fine," I told Meg, my voice turning bitter. The truth was, I had no choice. I could feel Meg's command sinking into my muscles, compelling me to obey.

I faced the fused oaks and put my hands against their trunks. I felt no oracular power within. I heard no voices—just heavy stubborn silence. The only message the trees seemed to be sending was: *GO AWAY.*

"If we do this," I told Meg, "Nero will destroy the grove."

"He won't."

"He has to. He can't control Dodona. Its power is too ancient. He can't let anyone else use it."

Meg placed her hands against the trees, just below mine. "Concentrate. Open them. Please. You don't want to anger the Beast."

She said this in a low voice—again speaking as if the Beast was someone I had not yet met…a boogeyman lurking under the bed, not a man in a purple suit standing a few feet away.

I could not refuse Meg's orders, but perhaps I should have protested more vigorously. Meg might have backed down if I called her bluff. But then Nero or Peaches or the Germani would have just killed me. I will confess to you: I was afraid of dying. Courageously, nobly, handsomely afraid, true. But afraid nonetheless.

I closed my eyes. I sensed the trees' implacable resistance, their mistrust of outsiders. I knew that if I forced open these gates, the grove would be destroyed.

Yet I reached out with all my willpower and sought the voice of prophecy, drawing it to me.

I thought of Rhea, Queen of the Titans, who had first planted this grove. Despite being a child of Gaea and Ouranos, despite being married to the cannibal king Kronos, Rhea had managed to cultivate wisdom and kindness. She had given birth to a new, better breed of immortals. (If I do say so myself.) She represented the best of the ancient times.

True, she had withdrawn from the world and started a pottery studio in Woodstock, but she still cared about Dodona. She had sent me here to open the grove, to share its power. She was not the kind of goddess who believed in closed gates or NO TRESPASSING signs. I began to hum softly "This Land Is Your Land."

The bark grew warm under my fingertips. The tree roots trembled.

I glanced at Meg. She was deep in concentration, leaning against the trunks as if trying to push them over. Everything about her was familiar: her ratty pageboy hair, her glittering cat-eye glasses, her runny nose and chewed cuticles and faint scent of apple pie.

But she was someone I didn't know at all: stepdaughter to the immortal crazy Nero. A member of the Imperial Household. What did that even *mean*? I pictured the Brady Bunch in purple togas, lined up on the family staircase with Nero at the bottom in Alice's maid uniform. Having a vivid imagination is a terrible curse.

Unfortunately for the grove, Meg was also the daughter of Demeter. The trees responded to her power. The twin oaks rumbled. Their trunks began to move.

I wanted to stop, but I was caught up in the momentum. The grove seemed to be drawing on my power now. My hands stuck to the trees. The gates opened wider, forcibly spreading my arms. For a terrifying moment, I thought the trees might keep moving and rip me limb from limb. Then they stopped. The roots settled. The bark cooled and released me.

I stumbled back, exhausted. Meg remained, transfixed, in the newly opened gateway.

On the other side were…well, more trees. Despite the winter cold, the young oaks rose tall and green, growing in concentric circles around a slightly larger specimen in the center. Littering the ground were acorns glowing with a faint amber light. Around the grove stood a protective wall of trees even more formidable than the ones in the antechamber. Above, another tightly woven dome of branches guarded the place from aerial intruders.

Before I could warn her, Meg stepped across the threshold. The voices

exploded. Imagine forty nail guns firing into your brain from all directions at once. The words were babble, but they tore at my sanity, demanding my attention. I covered my ears. The noise just got louder and more persistent.

Peaches clawed frantically at the dirt, trying to bury his head. Vince and Gary writhed on the ground. Even the unconscious demigods thrashed and moaned on their stakes.

Nero reeled, his hand raised as if to block an intense light. “Meg, control the voices! Do it now!”

Meg didn’t appear hurt by the noise, but she looked bewildered. “They’re saying something…” She swept her hands through the air, pulling at invisible threads to untangle the pandemonium. “They’re agitated. I can’t—Wait…”

Suddenly the voices shut off, as if they’d made their point.

Meg turned toward Nero, her eyes wide. “It’s true. The trees told me you mean to burn them.”

The Germani groaned, half-conscious on the ground. Nero recovered more quickly. He raised a finger, admonishing, guiding. “Listen to me, Meg. I’d hoped the grove could be useful, but obviously it is fractured and confused. You can’t believe what it says. It’s the mouthpiece of a senile Titan queen. The grove must be razed. It’s the only way, Meg. You understand that, don’t you?”

He kicked Gary over onto his back and rifled through the bodyguard’s pouches. Then Nero stood, triumphantly holding a box of matches.

“After the fire, we’ll rebuild,” he said. “It will be glorious!”

Meg stared at him as if noticing his horrendous neck beard for the first time. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

“He’s going to burn and level Long Island,” I said. “Then he’ll make it his private domain, just like he did with Rome.”

Nero laughed in exasperation. “Long Island is a mess anyway! No one will miss it. My new imperial complex will extend from Manhattan to Montauk—the greatest palace ever built! We’ll have private rivers and lakes, one hundred miles of beachfront property, gardens big enough for their own zip codes. I’ll build each member of my household a private skyscraper. Oh, Meg, imagine the parties we will have in our new Domus Aurea!”

The truth was a heavy thing. Meg’s knees buckled under its weight.

“You can’t.” Her voice shook. “The woods—I’m the daughter of Demeter.”

“You’re *my* daughter,” Nero corrected. “And I care for you deeply. Which is why you need to move aside. Quickly.”

He set a match to the striking surface of the box. “As soon as I light these stakes, our human torches will send a wave of fire straight through that gateway. Nothing will be able to stop it. The entire forest will burn.”

“Please!” Meg cried.

“Come along, dearest.” Nero’s frown hardened. “Apollo is of no use to us anymore. You don’t want to wake the Beast, do you?”

He lit his match and stepped toward the nearest stake, where my son Austin was bound.

32

It takes a Village
People to protect your mind
"Y.M.C.A." Yeah

OH, THIS PART IS DIFFICULT TO TELL.

I am a natural storyteller. I have an infallible instinct for drama. I want to relate what *should* have happened: how I leaped forward shouting, "Nooooo!" and spun like an acrobat, knocking aside the lit match, then twisted in a series of blazing-fast Shaolin moves, cracking Nero's head and taking out his bodyguards before they could recover.

Ah, yes. That would have been perfect.

Alas, the truth constrains me.

Curse you, truth!

In fact, I spluttered something like, "Nuh-uh, dun-doot!" I may have waved my Brazilian handkerchief with the hope that its magic would destroy my enemies.

The real hero was Peaches. The karpos must have sensed Meg's true feelings, or perhaps he just didn't like the idea of burning forests. He hurtled through the air, screaming his war cry (you guessed it), "Peaches!" He landed on Nero's arm, chomped the lit match from the emperor's hand, then landed a few feet away, wiping his tongue and crying, "Hat! Hat!" (Which I assumed meant *hot* in the dialect of deciduous fruit.)

The scene might have been funny except that the Germani were now back on their feet, five demigods and a geyser spirit were still tied to highly flammable posts, and Nero still had a box of matches.

The emperor stared at his empty hand. "Meg…?" His voice was as cold as an icicle. "What is the meaning of this?"

"P-Peaches, come here!" Meg's voice had turned brittle with fear.

The karpos bounded to her side. He hissed at me, Nero, and the Germani.

Meg took a shaky breath, clearly gathering her nerve. “Nero…Peaches is right. You—you can’t burn these people alive.”

Nero sighed. He looked at his bodyguards for moral support, but the Germani still appeared woozy. They were hitting the sides of their heads as if trying to clear water from their ears.

“Meg,” said the emperor, “I am trying so hard to keep the Beast at bay. Why won’t you help me? I know you are a good girl. I wouldn’t have allowed you to roam around Manhattan so much on your own, playing the street waif, if I didn’t know you could take care of yourself. But softness toward your enemies is not a virtue. You are my stepdaughter. Any of these demigods would kill you without hesitation given the chance.”

“Meg, that’s not true!” I said. “You’ve seen what Camp Half-Blood is like.”

She studied me uneasily. “Even…even if it was true…” She turned to Nero. “You told me never to lower myself to my enemies’ level.”

“No, indeed.” Nero’s tone had frayed like a weathered rope. “We are better. We are stronger. We will build a glorious new world. But these nonsense-spewing trees stand in our way, Meg. Like any invasive weeds, they must be burned. And the only way to do that is with a true conflagration—flames stoked by blood. Let us do this together, and not involve the Beast, shall we?”

Finally, in my mind, something clicked. I remembered how my father used to punish me centuries ago, when I was a young god learning the ways of Olympus. Zeus used to say, *Don’t get on the wrong side of my lightning bolts, boy.*

As if the lightning bolt had a mind of its own—as if Zeus had nothing to do with the punishments he meted out upon me.

Don’t blame me, his tone implied. *It’s the lightning bolt that seared every molecule in your body.* Many years later, when I killed the Cyclopes who made Zeus’s lightning, it was no rash decision. I’d always *hated* those lightning bolts. It was easier than hating my father.

Nero took the same tone when he referred to himself as the Beast. He spoke of his anger and cruelty as if they were forces outside his control. If he flew into a rage…well then, he would hold *Meg* responsible.

The realization sickened me. Meg had been trained to regard her kindly stepfather Nero and the terrifying Beast as two separate people. I understood now why she preferred to spend her time in the alleys of New York. I understood why she had such quick mood changes, going from cartwheels to full shutdown in a matter of seconds. She never knew what might unleash the Beast.

She fixed her eyes on me. Her lips quivered. I could tell she wanted a way out—some eloquent argument that would mollify her stepfather and allow her to

follow her conscience. But I was no longer a silver-tongued god. I could not outtalk an orator like Nero. And I would not play the Beast's blame game.

Instead, I took a page from Meg's book, which was always short and to the point.

"He's evil," I said. "You're good. You must make your own choice."

I could tell that this was not the news Meg wanted. Her mouth tightened. She drew back her shoulder blades as if preparing for a measles shot—something painful but necessary. She placed her hand on the karpos's curly scalp. "Peaches," she said in a small but firm voice, "get the matchbox."

The karpos sprang into action. Nero barely had time to blink before Peaches ripped the box from his hand and jumped back to Meg's side.

The Germani readied their spears. Nero raised his hand for restraint. He gave Meg a look that might have been heartbreak—if he had possessed a heart.

"I see you weren't ready for this assignment, my dear," he said. "It's my fault. Vince, Gary, detain Meg but don't hurt her. When we get home…" He shrugged, his expression full of regret. "As for Apollo and the little fruit demon, they will have to burn."

"No," Meg croaked. Then, at full volume, she shouted, "NO!" And the Grove of Dodona shouted with her.

The blast was so powerful, it knocked Nero and his guards off their feet. Peaches screamed and beat his head against the dirt.

This time, however, I was more prepared. As the trees' ear-splitting chorus reached its crescendo, I anchored my mind with the catchiest tune I could imagine. I hummed "Y.M.C.A.," which I used to perform with the Village People in my construction worker costume until the Indian chief and I got in a fight over—Never mind. That's not important.

"Meg!" I pulled the brass wind chimes from my pocket and tossed them to her. "Put these on the center tree! *Y.M.C.A.* Focus the grove's energy! *Y.M.C.A.*"

I wasn't sure she could hear me. She raised the chimes and watched as they swayed and clanked, turning the noise from the trees into snatches of coherent speech: *Happiness approaches. The fall of the sun; the final verse. Would you like to hear our specials today?*

Meg's face went slack with surprise. She turned toward the grove and sprinted through the gateway. Peaches crawled after her, shaking his head.

I wanted to follow, but I couldn't leave Nero and his guards alone with six hostages. Still humming "Y.M.C.A.," I marched toward them.

The trees screamed louder than ever, but Nero rose to his knees. He pulled something from his coat pocket—a vial of liquid—and splashed it on the ground in front of him. I doubted that was a good thing, but I had more immediate

concerns. Vince and Gary were getting up. Vince thrust his spear in my direction.

I was angry enough to be reckless. I grabbed the point of his weapon and yanked the spear up, smacking Vince under his chin. He fell, stunned, and I grabbed fistfuls of his hide armor.

He was easily twice my size. I didn't care. I lifted him off his feet. My arms sizzled with power. I felt invincibly strong—the way a god *should* feel. I had no idea why my strength had returned, but I decided this was not the moment to question my good luck. I spun Vince like a discus, tossing him skyward with such force that he punched a Germanus-shaped hole in the tree canopy and sailed out of sight.

Kudos to the Imperial Guard for having stupid amounts of courage. Despite my show of force, Gary charged me. With one hand, I snapped his spear. With the other, I punched a fist straight through his shield and hit his chest with enough might to fell a rhinoceros.

He collapsed in a heap.

I faced Nero. I could already feel my strength ebbing. My muscles were returning to their pathetic mortal flabbiness. I just hoped I'd have enough time to rip off Nero's head and stuff it down his mauve suit.

The emperor snarled. "You're a fool, Apollo. You *always* focus on the wrong thing." He glanced at his Rolex. "My wrecking crew will be here any minute. Once Camp Half-Blood is destroyed, I'll make it my new front lawn! Meanwhile, you'll be here…putting out fires."

From his vest pocket, he produced a silver cigarette lighter. Typical of Nero to keep several forms of fire-making close at hand. I looked at the glistening streaks of oil he had splashed on the ground….Greek fire, of course.

"Don't," I said.

Nero grinned. "Good-bye, Apollo. Only eleven more Olympians to go."

He dropped the lighter.

I did not have the pleasure of tearing Nero's head off.

Could I have stopped him from fleeing? Possibly. But the flames were roaring between us, burning grass and bones, tree roots, and the earth itself. The blaze was too strong to stamp out, if Greek fire even *could* be stamped out, and it was rolling hungrily toward the six bound hostages.

I let Nero go. Somehow he hauled Gary to his feet and lugged the punch-drunk Germanus toward the ants' nest. Meanwhile, I ran to the stakes.

The closest was Austin's. I wrapped my arms around the base and pulled,

completely disregarding proper heavy-lifting techniques. My muscles strained. My eyes swam with the effort. I managed to raise the stake enough to topple it backward. Austin stirred and groaned.

I dragged him, cocoon and all, to the other side of the clearing, as far from the fire as possible. I would have brought him into the Grove of Dodona, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be doing him any favors by putting him in a dead-end clearing full of insane voices, in the direct path of approaching flames.

I ran back to the stakes. I repeated the process—uprooting Kayla, then Paulie the geyser god, then the others. By the time I pulled Miranda Gardiner to safety, the fire was a raging red tidal wave, only inches from the gates of the grove.

My divine strength was gone. Meg and Peaches were nowhere to be seen. I had bought a few minutes for the hostages, but the fire would eventually consume us all. I fell to my knees and sobbed.

"Help." I scanned the dark trees, tangled and foreboding. I did not expect any help. I was not even used to *asking* for help. I was Apollo. Mortals called to *me*! (Yes, occasionally I might have ordered demigods to run trivial errands for me, like starting wars or retrieving magic items from monsters' lairs, but those requests didn't count.)

"I can't do this alone." I imagined Daphne's face floating beneath the trunk of one tree, then another. Soon the woods would burn. I couldn't save them any more than I could save Meg or the lost demigods or myself. "I'm so sorry. Please…forgive me."

My head must have been spinning from smoke inhalation. I began to hallucinate. The shimmering forms of dryads emerged from their trees—a legion of Daphnes in green gossamer dresses. Their expressions were melancholy, as if they knew they were going to their deaths, yet they circled the fire. They raised their arms, and the earth erupted at their feet. A torrent of mud churned over the flames. The dryads drew the fire's heat into their bodies. Their skin charred black. Their faces hardened and cracked.

As soon as the last flames were snuffed out, the dryads crumbled to ash. I wished I could crumble with them. I wanted to cry, but the fire had seared all the moisture from my tear ducts. I had not asked for so many sacrifices. I had not expected it! I felt hollow, guilty, and ashamed.

Then it occurred to me how many times I *had* asked for sacrifices, how many heroes I had sent to their deaths. Had they been any less noble and courageous than these dryads? Yet I had felt no remorse when I sent them off on deadly tasks. I had used them and discarded them, laid waste to their lives to build my own glory. I was no less of a monster than Nero.

Wind blew through the clearing—an unseasonably warm gust that swirled up

the ashes and carried them through the forest canopy into the sky. Only after the breeze calmed did I realize it must have been the West Wind, my old rival, offering me consolation. He had swept up the remains and taken them off to their next beautiful reincarnation. After all these centuries, Zephyros had accepted my apology.

I discovered I had some tears left after all.

Behind me, someone groaned. “Where am I?”

Austin was awake.

I crawled to his side, now weeping with relief, and kissed his face. “My beautiful son!”

He blinked at me in confusion. His cornrows were sprinkled with ashes like frost on a field. I suppose it took a moment for him to process why he was being fawned over by a grungy, half-deranged boy with acne.

“Ah, right…Apollo.” He tried to move. “What the—? Why am I wrapped in smelly bandages? Could you free me, maybe?”

I laughed hysterically, which I doubt helped Austin’s peace of mind. I clawed at his bindings but made no progress. Then I remembered Gary’s snapped spear. I retrieved the point and spent several minutes sawing Austin free.

Once pulled from the stake, he stumbled around, trying to shake the circulation back into his limbs. He took in the scene—the smoldering forest, the other prisoners. The Grove of Dodona had stopped its wild chorus of screaming. (When had that happened?) A radiant amber light now glowed from the gateway.

“What’s going on?” Austin asked. “Also, where is my saxophone?”

Sensible questions. I wished I had sensible answers. All I knew was that Meg McCaffrey was still wandering in the grove, and I did not like the fact that the trees had gone silent.

I stared at my weak mortal arms. I wondered why I’d experienced a sudden surge of divine strength when facing the Germani. Had my emotions triggered it? Was it the first sign of my godly vigor returning for good? Or perhaps Zeus was just messing with me again—giving me a taste of my old power before yanking it away once more. *Remember this, kid? WELL, YOU CAN’T HAVE IT!*

I wished I could summon that strength again, but I would have to make do.

I handed Austin the broken spear. “Free the others. I’ll be back.”

Austin stared at me incredulously. “You’re going in *there*? Is it safe?”

“I doubt it,” I said.

Then I ran toward the Oracle.

33

Parting is sorrow
Nothing about it is sweet
Don't step on my face

THE TREES WERE using their inside voices.

As I stepped through the gateway, I realized they were still talking in conversational tones, babbling nonsensically like sleepwalkers at a cocktail party.

I scanned the grove. No sign of Meg. I called her name. The trees responded by raising their voices, driving me cross-eyed with dizziness.

I steadied myself on the nearest oak.

"Watch it, man," the tree said.

I lurched forward, the trees trading bits of verse as if playing a game of rhymes:

'es of blue.
ke the hue.
tward, burning.
es turning.
ana.
e banana.
piness approaches.
ents and roaches.

None of it made sense, but each line carried the weight of prophecy. I felt as if dozens of important statements, each vital to my survival, were being blended together, loaded in a shotgun, and fired at my face.

(Oh, that's a rather good image. I'll have to use it in a haiku.)

“Meg!” I called again.

Still no reply. The grove did not seem so large. How could she not hear me? How could I not see her?

I slogged along, humming a perfect A 440 hertz tone to keep myself focused. When I reached the second ring of trees, the oaks became more conversational.

“Hey, buddy, got a quarter?” one asked.

Another tried to tell me a joke about a penguin and a nun walking into a Shake Shack.

A third oak was giving its neighbor an infomercial sales pitch about a food processor. “And you won’t believe what it does with pasta!”

“Wow!” said the other tree. “It makes pasta, too?”

“Fresh linguine in minutes!” the sales oak enthused.

I did not understand why an oak tree would want linguine, but I kept moving. I was afraid that if I listened too long, I would order the food processor for three easy installments of $39.99, and my sanity would be lost forever.

Finally, I reached the center of the grove. On the far side of the largest oak tree, Meg stood with her back to the trunk, her eyes closed tight. The wind chimes were still in her hand, but they hung forgotten at her side. The brass cylinders clanked, muted against her dress.

At her feet, Peaches rocked back and forth, giggling. “Apples? Peaches! Mangoes? Peaches!”

“Meg.” I touched her shoulder.

She flinched. She focused on me as if I were a clever optical illusion. Her eyes simmered with fear. “It’s too much,” she said. “Too much.”

The voices had her in their grip. It was bad enough for me to endure—like a hundred radio stations playing at once, forcibly splitting my brain into different channels. But I was used to prophecies. Meg, on the other hand, was a daughter of Demeter. The trees liked her. They were all trying to share with her, to get her attention at the same time. Soon they would permanently fracture her mind.

“The wind chimes,” I said. “Hang them in the tree!”

I pointed to the lowest branch, well above our heads. Alone, neither of us could reach it, but if I gave Meg a boost…

Meg backed away, shaking her head. The voices of Dodona were so chaotic I wasn’t sure she had heard me. If she had, she either didn’t understand or didn’t trust me.

I had to tamp down my feelings of betrayal. Meg was Nero’s stepdaughter. She had been sent to lure me here, and our whole friendship was a lie. She had no right to mistrust *me*.

But I could not stay bitter. If I blamed her for the way Nero had twisted her

emotions, I was no better than the Beast. Also, just because she had lied about being my friend did not mean I wasn't hers. She was in danger. I was not going to leave her to the madness of the grove's penguin jokes.

I crouched and laced my fingers to make a foothold. "Please."

To my left, Peaches rolled onto his back and wailed, "Linguine? Peaches!"

Meg grimaced. I could see from her eyes that she was deciding to cooperate with me—not because she trusted me, but because Peaches was suffering.

Just when I thought my feelings could not be hurt any worse. It was one thing to be betrayed. It was another thing to be considered less important than a diapered fruit spirit.

Nevertheless, I remained steady as Meg placed her left foot in my hands. With all my remaining strength, I hoisted her up. She stepped onto my shoulders, then planted one red sneaker on top of my head. I made a mental note to put a safety label on my scalp: WARNING, TOP STEP IS NOT FOR STANDING.

With my back against the oak, I could feel the voices of the grove coursing up its trunk and drumming through its bark. The central tree seemed to be one giant antenna for crazy talk.

My knees were about to buckle. Meg's treads were grinding into my forehead. The A 440 I had been humming rapidly deflated to a G sharp.

Finally, Meg tied the wind chimes to the branch. She jumped down as my legs collapsed, and we both ended up sprawled in the dirt.

The brass chimes swayed and clanged, picking notes out of the wind and making chords from the dissonance.

The grove hushed, as if the trees were listening and thinking, *Oooh, pretty.*

Then the ground trembled. The central oak shook with such energy, it rained acorns.

Meg got to her feet. She approached the tree and touched its trunk.

"Speak," she commanded.

A single voice boomed forth from the wind chimes, like a cheerleader screaming through a megaphone:

re once was a god named Apollo
o plunged in a cave blue and hollow
on a three-seater
bronze fire-eater
forced death and madness to swallow

The wind chimes stilled. The grove settled into tranquility, as if satisfied with

the death sentence it had given me.

Oh, the horror!

A sonnet I could have handled. A quatrain would have been cause for celebration. But only the deadliest prophecies are couched in the form of a limerick.

I stared at the wind chimes, hoping they would speak again and correct themselves. *Oops, our mistake! That prophecy was for a* different *Apollo!*

But my luck was not that good. I had been handed an edict worse than a thousand advertisements for pasta makers.

Peaches rose. He shook his head and hissed at the oak tree, which expressed my own sentiments perfectly. He hugged Meg's calf as if she were the only thing keeping him from falling off the world. The scene was almost sweet, except for the karpos's fangs and glowing eyes.

Meg regarded me warily. The lenses of her glasses were spiderwebbed with cracks.

"That prophecy," she said. "Did you understand it?"

I swallowed a mouthful of soot. "Perhaps. Some of it. We'll need to talk to Rachel—"

"There's no more *we*." Meg's tone was as acrid as the volcanic gas of Delphi. "Do what you need to do. That's my final order."

This hit me like a spear shaft to the chin, despite the fact that she had lied to me and betrayed me.

"Meg, you can't." I couldn't keep the shakiness out of my voice. "You claimed my service. Until my trials are over—"

"I release you."

"No!" I could not stand the idea of being abandoned. Not again. Not by this ragamuffin Dumpster queen whom I'd learned to care about so much. "You can't *possibly* believe in Nero now. You heard him explain his plans. He means to level this entire island! You saw what he tried to do to his hostages."

"He—he wouldn't have let them burn. He promised. He held back. You saw it. That wasn't the Beast."

My rib cage felt like an over-tightened harp. "Meg…Nero *is* the Beast. He killed your father."

"No! Nero is my stepfather. My dad…my dad unleashed the Beast. He made it angry."

"Meg—"

"Stop!" She covered her ears. "You don't know him. Nero is good to me. I

can talk to him. I can make it okay."

Her denial was so complete, so irrational, I realized there was no way I could argue with her. She reminded me painfully of myself when I fell to earth—how I had refused to accept my new reality. Without Meg's help, I would've gotten myself killed. Now our roles were reversed.

I edged toward her, but Peaches's snarl stopped me in my tracks.

Meg backed away. "We're done."

"We can't be," I said. "We're bound, whether you like it or not."

It occurred to me that she'd said the exact same thing to me only a few days before.

She gave me one last look through her cracked lenses. I would have given anything for her to blow a raspberry. I wanted to walk the streets of Manhattan with her doing cartwheels in the intersections. I missed hobbling with her through the Labyrinth, our legs tied together. I would've settled for a good garbage fight in an alley. Instead, she turned and fled, with Peaches at her heels. It seemed to me that they dissolved into the trees, just the way Daphne had done long ago.

Above my head, a breeze made the wind chimes jingle. This time, no voices came from the trees. I didn't know how long Dodona would remain silent, but I didn't want to be here if the oaks decided to start telling jokes again.

I turned and saw something strange at my feet: an arrow with an oak shaft and green fletching.

There shouldn't have been an arrow. I hadn't brought any into the grove. But in my dazed state, I didn't question this. I did what any archer would do: I retrieved it, and returned it to my quiver.

34

Uber's got nothing
Lyft is weak. And taxis? Nah
My ride is da mom

AUSTIN HAD FREED THE OTHER PRISONERS.

They looked like they had been dipped in a vat of glue and cotton swabs, but otherwise they seemed remarkably undamaged. Ellis Wakefield staggered around with his fists clenched, looking for something to punch. Cecil Markowitz, son of Hermes, sat on the ground trying to clean his sneakers with a deer's thighbone. Austin—resourceful boy!—had produced a canteen of water and was washing the Greek fire off of Kayla's face. Miranda Gardiner, the head counselor of Demeter, knelt by the place where the dryads had sacrificed themselves. She wept silently.

Paulie the palikos floated toward me. Like his partner, Pete, his lower half was all steam. From the waist up he looked like a slimmer, more abused version of his geyser buddy. His mud skin was cracked like a parched riverbed. His face was withered, as if every bit of moisture had been squeezed out of him. Looking at the damage Nero had done to him, I added a few more items to a mental list I was preparing: *Ways to Torture an Emperor in the Fields of Punishment.*

"You saved me," Paulie said with amazement. "Bring it in!"

He threw his arms around me. His power was so diminished that his body heat did not kill me, but it did open up my sinuses quite well.

"You should get home," I said. "Pete is worried, and you need to regain your strength."

"Ah, man…" Paulie wiped a steaming tear from his face. "Yeah, I'm gone. But anything you ever need—a free steam cleaning, some PR work, a mud scrub, you name it."

As he dissolved into mist, I called after him. "And Paulie? I'd give the

Woods at Camp Half-Blood a ten for customer satisfaction."

Paulie beamed with gratitude. He tried to hug me again, but he was already ninety percent steam. All I got was a humid waft of mud-scented air. Then he was gone.

The five demigods gathered around me.

Miranda looked past me at the grove of Dodona. Her eyes were still puffy from crying, but she had beautiful irises the color of new foliage. "So, the voices I heard from that grove…It's really an oracle? Those trees can give us prophecies?"

I shivered, thinking of the oak trees' limerick. "Perhaps."

"Can I see—?"

"No," I said. "Not until we understand the place better."

I had already lost one daughter of Demeter today. I didn't intend to lose another.

"I don't get it," Ellis grumbled. "You're Apollo? Like, *the* Apollo."

"I'm afraid so. It's a long story."

"Oh, gods…" Kayla scanned the clearing. "I thought I heard Meg's voice earlier. Did I dream that? Was she with you? Is she okay?"

The others looked at me for an explanation. Their expressions were so fragile and tentative, I decided I couldn't break down in front of them.

"She's…alive," I managed. "She had to leave."

"What?" Kayla asked. "Why?"

"Nero," I said. "She…she went after Nero."

"Hold up." Austin raised his fingers like goalposts. "When you say Nero…"

I did my best to explain how the mad emperor had captured them. They deserved to know. As I recounted the story, Nero's words kept replaying in my mind: *My wrecking crew will be here any minute. Once Camp Half-Blood is destroyed, I'll make it my new front lawn!*

I wanted to think this was just bluster. Nero had always loved threats and grandiose statements. Unlike me, he was a terrible poet. He used flowery language like…well, like every sentence was a pungent bouquet of metaphors. (Oh, that's another good one. Jotting that down.)

Why had he kept checking his watch? And what wrecking crew could he have been talking about? I had a flashback to my dream of the sun bus careening toward a giant bronze face.

I felt like I was free-falling again. Nero's plan became horribly clear. After dividing the few demigods defending the camp, he had meant to burn this grove. But that was only part of his attack….

"Oh, gods," I said. "The Colossus."

The five demigods shifted uneasily.

"What Colossus?" Kayla asked. "You mean the Colossus of Rhodes?"

"No," I said. "The Colossus Neronis."

Cecil scratched his head. "The Colossus Neurotic?"

Ellis Wakefield snorted. "*You're* a Colossus Neurotic, Markowitz. Apollo's talking about the big replica of Nero that stood outside the amphitheater in Rome, right?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "While we're standing here, Nero is going to try to destroy Camp Half-Blood. And the Colossus will be his wrecking crew."

Miranda flinched. "You mean a giant statue is about to stomp on *camp*? I thought the Colossus was destroyed centuries ago."

Ellis frowned. "Supposedly, so was the Athena Parthenos. Now it's sitting on top of Half-Blood Hill."

The others' expressions turned grim. When a child of Ares makes a valid point, you know the situation is serious.

"Speaking of Athena…" Austin picked some incendiary fluff off his shoulder. "Won't the statue protect us? I mean, that's what she's there for, right?"

"She will try," I guessed. "But you must understand, the Athena Parthenos draws her power from her followers. The more demigods under her care, the more formidable her magic. And right now—"

"The camp is practically empty," Miranda finished.

"Not only that," I said, "but the Athena Parthenos is roughly forty feet tall. If memory serves, Nero's Colossus was more than twice that."

Ellis grunted. "So they're not in the same weight class. It's an uneven match."

Cecil Markowitz stood a little straighter. "Guys…did you feel that?"

I thought he might be playing one of his Hermes pranks. Then the ground shook again, ever so slightly. From somewhere in the distance came a rumbling sound like a battleship scraping over a sandbar.

"Please tell me that was thunder," Kayla said.

Ellis cocked his head, listening. "It's a war machine. A big automaton wading ashore about half a klick from here. We need to get to camp right now."

No one argued with Ellis's assessment. I supposed he could distinguish between the sounds of war machines the same way I could pick out an off-tune violin in a Rachmaninoff symphony.

To their credit, the demigods rose to the challenge. Despite the fact that they'd been recently bound, doused in flammable substances, and staked like human tiki torches, they closed ranks and faced me with determination in their eyes.

“How do we get out of here?” Austin asked. “The myrmekes’ lair?”

I felt suddenly suffocated, partly because I had five people looking at me as if I knew what to do. I didn’t. In fact, if you want to know a secret, we gods usually don’t. When confronted for answers, we usually say something Rhea-like: *You will have to find out for yourself!* Or *True wisdom must be earned!* But I didn’t think that would fly in this situation.

Also, I had no desire to plunge back into the ants’ nest. Even if we made it through alive, it would take much too long. Then we would have to run perhaps half the length of the forest.

I stared at the Vince-shaped hole in the canopy. “I don’t suppose any of you can fly?”

They shook their heads.

“I can cook,” Cecil offered.

Ellis smacked him on the shoulder.

I looked back at the myrmekes’ tunnel. The solution came to me like a voice whispering in my ear: *You know someone who can fly, stupid.*

It was a risky idea. Then again, rushing off to fight a giant automaton was also not the safest plan of action.

“I think there’s a way,” I said. “But I’ll need your help.”

Austin balled his fists. “Anything you need. We’re ready to fight.”

“Actually…I don’t need you to fight. I need you to lay down a beat.”

My next important discovery: Children of Hermes cannot rap. At all.

Bless his conniving little heart, Cecil Markowitz tried his best, but he kept throwing off my rhythm section with his spastic clapping and terrible air mic noises. After a few trial runs, I demoted him to dancer. His job would be to shimmy back and forth and wave his hands, which he did with the enthusiasm of a tent-revival preacher.

The others managed to keep up. They still looked like half-plucked, highly combustible chickens, but they bopped with the proper amount of soul.

I launched into “Mama,” my throat reinforced with water and cough drops from Kayla’s belt pack. (Ingenious girl! Who brings cough drops on a three-legged death race?)

I sang directly into the mouth of the myrmekes’ tunnel, trusting the acoustics to carry my message. We did not have to wait long. The earth began to rumble beneath our feet. I kept singing. I had warned my comrades not to stop laying down the righteous beat until the song was over.

Still, I almost lost it when the ground exploded. I had been watching the

tunnel, but Mama did not use tunnels. She exited wherever she wanted—in this case, straight out of the earth twenty yards away, spraying dirt, grass, and small boulders in all directions. She scuttled forward, mandibles clacking, wings buzzing, dark Teflon eyes focused on me. Her abdomen was no longer swollen, so I assumed she had finished depositing her most recent batch of killer-ant larvae. I hoped this meant she would be in a good mood, not a hungry mood.

Behind her, two winged soldiers clambered out of the earth. I had not been expecting bonus ants. (Really, *bonus ants* is not a term most people would like to hear.) They flanked the queen, their antennae quivering.

I finished my ode, then dropped to one knee, spreading my arms as I had before.

"Mama," I said, "we need a ride."

My logic was this: Mothers were used to giving rides. With thousands upon thousands of offspring, I assumed the queen ant would be the ultimate soccer mom. And indeed, Mama grabbed me with her mandibles and tossed me over her head.

Despite what the demigods may tell you, I did not flail, scream, or land in a way that damaged my sensitive parts. I landed heroically, straddling the queen's neck, which was no larger than the back of an average warhorse. I shouted to my comrades, "Join me! It's perfectly safe!"

For some reason, they hesitated. The ants did not. The queen tossed Kayla just behind me. The soldier ants followed Mama's lead—snapping up two demigods each and throwing them aboard.

The three myrmekes revved their wings with a noise like radiator fan blades. Kayla grabbed my waist.

"Is this *really* safe?" she yelled.

"Perfectly!" I hoped I was right. "Perhaps even safer than the sun chariot!"

"Didn't the sun chariot almost destroy the world once?"

"Well, twice," I said. "Three times, if you count the day I let Thalia Grace drive, but—"

"Forget I asked!"

Mama launched herself into the sky. The canopy of twisted branches blocked our path, but Mama didn't pay any more attention to them than she had to the ton of solid earth she'd plowed through.

I yelled, "Duck!"

We flattened ourselves against Mama's armored head as she smashed through the trees, leaving a thousand wooden splinters embedded in my back. It felt so good to fly again, I didn't care. We soared above the woods and banked to the east.

For two or three seconds, I was exhilarated.
Then I heard the screaming from Camp Half-Blood.

35

Buck-naked statue
A Neurotic Colossus
Where art thy undies?

EVEN MY SUPERNATURAL POWERS of description fail me.

Imagine seeing yourself as a hundred-foot-tall bronze statue—a replica of your own magnificence, gleaming in the late afternoon light.

Now imagine that this ridiculously handsome statue is wading out of Long Island Sound onto the North Shore. In his hand is a ship's rudder—a blade the size of a stealth bomber, fixed to a fifty-foot-long pole—and Mr. Gorgeous is raising said rudder to smash the crud out of Camp Half-Blood.

This was the sight that greeted us as we flew in from the woods.

"How is that thing *alive*?" Kayla demanded. "What did Nero do—order it online?"

"The Triumvirate has vast resources," I told her. "They've had centuries to prepare. Once they reconstructed the statue, all they had to do was fill it with some animating magic—usually the harnessed life forces of wind or water spirits. I'm not sure. That's really more of Hephaestus's specialty."

"So how do we kill it?"

"I'm…I'm working on that."

All across the valley, campers screamed and ran for their weapons. Nico and Will were floundering in the lake, apparently having been capsized in the middle of a canoe ride. Chiron galloped through the dunes, harrying the Colossus with his arrows. Even by my standards, Chiron was a very fine archer. He targeted the statue's joints and seams, yet his shots did not seem to bother the automaton at all. Already dozens of missiles stuck from the Colossus's armpits and neck like unruly hair.

"More quivers!" Chiron shouted. "Quickly!"

Rachel Dare stumbled from the armory carrying half a dozen, and she ran to resupply him.

The Colossus brought down his rudder to smash the dining pavilion, but his blade bounced off the camp's magical barrier, sparking as if it had hit solid metal. Mr. Gorgeous took another step inland, but the barrier resisted him, pushing him back with the force of a wind tunnel.

On Half-Blood Hill, a silver aura surrounded the Athena Parthenos. I wasn't sure the demigods could see it, but every so often a beam of ultraviolet light shot from Athena's helmet like a search lamp, hitting the Colossus's chest and pushing back the invader. Next to her, in the tall pine tree, the Golden Fleece blazed with fiery energy. The dragon Peleus hissed and paced around the trunk, ready to defend his turf.

These were powerful forces, but I did not need godly sight to tell me that they would soon fail. The camp's defensive barriers were designed to turn away the occasional stray monster, to confuse mortals and prevent them from detecting the valley, and to provide a first line of defense against invading forces. A criminally beautiful hundred-foot-tall Celestial bronze giant was another thing entirely. Soon the Colossus would break through and destroy everything in its path.

"Apollo!" Kayla nudged me in the ribs. "What do we do?"

I stirred, again with the unpleasant realization that I was expected to have answers. My first instinct was to order a seasoned demigod to take charge. Wasn't it the weekend yet? Where was Percy Jackson? Or those Roman praetors Frank Zhang and Reyna Ramírez-Arellano? Yes, they would have done nicely.

My second instinct was to turn to Meg McCaffrey. How quickly I had grown used to her annoying yet strangely endearing presence! Alas, she was gone. Her absence felt like a Colossus stomping upon my heart. (This was an easy metaphor to summon, since the Colossus was presently stomping on a great many things.)

Flanking us on either side, the soldier ants flew in formation, awaiting the queen's orders. The demigods watched me anxiously, random bits of bandage fluff swirling from their bodies as we sped through the air.

I leaned forward and spoke to Mama in a soothing tone, "I know I cannot ask you to risk your life for us."

Mama hummed as if to say, *You're darn right!*

"Just give us one pass around that statue's head?" I asked. "Enough to distract it. Then set us down on the beach?"

She clicked her mandibles doubtfully.

"You're the best mama in the whole world," I added, "and you look lovely

today.”

That line always worked with Leto. It did the trick with Mama Ant, too. She twitched her antennae, perhaps sending a high-frequency signal to her soldiers, and all three ants banked hard to the right.

Below us, more campers joined the battle. Sherman Yang had harnessed two pegasi to a chariot and was now circling the statue’s legs, while Julia and Alice threw electric javelins at the Colossus’s knees. The missiles stuck in his joints, discharging tendrils of blue lightning, but the statue barely seemed to notice. Meanwhile, at his feet, Connor Stoll and Harley used twin flamethrowers to give the Colossus a molten pedicure, while the Nike twins manned a catapult, lobbing boulders at the Colossus’s Celestial bronze crotch.

Malcolm Pace, a true child of Athena, was coordinating the attacks from a hastily organized command post on the green. He and Nyssa had spread war maps across a card table and were shouting targeting coordinates, while Chiara, Damien, Paolo, and Billie rushed to set up ballistae around the communal hearth.

Malcolm looked like the perfect battlefield commander, except for the fact that he’d forgotten his pants. His red briefs made quite a statement with his sword and leather cuirass.

Mama dove toward the Colossus, leaving my stomach at a higher altitude.

I had a moment to appreciate the statue’s regal features, its metal brow rimmed with a spiky crown meant to represent the beams of the sun. The Colossus was supposed to be Nero as the sun god, but the emperor had wisely made the face resemble mine more closely than his. Only the line of its nose and its ghastly neck beard suggested Nero’s trademark ugliness.

Also…did I mention that the hundred-foot statue was entirely nude? Well, of course it was. Gods are almost always depicted as nude, because we are flawless beings. Why would you cover up perfection? Still, it was a little disconcerting to see my buck-naked self stomping around, slamming a ship’s rudder at Camp Half-Blood.

As we approached the Colossus, I bellowed loudly, “IMPOSTER! I AM THE REAL APOLLO! YOU’RE UGLY!”

Oh, dear reader, it was hard to yell such words at my own handsome visage, but I did. Such was my courage.

The Colossus did not like being insulted. As Mama and her soldiers veered away, the statue swung its rudder upward.

Have you ever collided with a bomber? I had a sudden flashback to Dresden in 1945, when the planes were so thick in the air, I literally could not find a safe lane to drive in. The axle on the sun chariot was out of alignment for *weeks* after that.

I realized the ants were not fast enough fliers to escape the rudder's reach. I saw catastrophe approaching in slow motion. At the last possible moment, I yelled, "Dive!"

We plunged straight down. The rudder only clipped the ants' wings—but it was enough to send us spiraling toward the beach.

I was grateful for soft sand.

I ate quite a bit of it when we crash-landed.

By sheer luck, none of us died, though Kayla and Austin had to pull me to my feet.

"Are you okay?" Austin asked.

"Fine," I said. "We must hurry."

The Colossus stared down at us, perhaps trying to discern whether we were dying in agony yet or needed some additional pain. I had wanted to get his attention, and I had succeeded. Huzzah.

I glanced at Mama and her soldiers, who were shaking the sand off their carapaces. "Thank you. Now save yourselves. Fly!"

They did not need to be told twice. I suppose ants have a natural fear of large humanoids looming over them, about to squash them with a heavy foot. Mama and her guards buzzed into the sky.

Miranda looked after them. "I never thought I'd say this about bugs, but I'm going to miss those guys."

"Hey!" called Nico di Angelo. He and Will scrambled over the dunes, still dripping from their swim in the canoe lake.

"What's the plan?" Will seemed calm, but I knew him well enough by now to tell that inside he was as charged as a bare electrical wire.

BOOM.

The statue strode toward us. One more step, and it would be on top of us.

"Isn't there a control valve on its ankle?" Ellis asked. "If we can open it—"

"No," I said. "You're thinking of Talos. This is not Talos."

Nico brushed his dark wet hair from his forehead. "Then what?"

I had a lovely view of the Colossus's nose. Its nostrils were sealed with bronze…I supposed because Nero hadn't wanted his detractors trying to shoot arrows into his imperial noggin.

I yelped.

Kayla grabbed my arm. "Apollo, what's wrong?"

Arrows into the Colossus's head. Oh, gods, I had an idea that would never, ever work. However, it seemed better than our other option, which was to be

crushed under a two-ton bronze foot.

"Will, Kayla, Austin," I said, "come with me."

"And Nico," said Nico. "I have a doctor's note."

"Fine!" I said. "Ellis, Cecil, Miranda—do whatever you can to keep the Colossus's attention."

The shadow of an enormous foot darkened the sand.

"Now!" I yelled. "Scatter!"

36

I love me some plague
When it's on the right arrow
Ka-bam! You dead, bro?

SCATTERING WAS THE EASY PART. They did that very well.

Miranda, Cecil, and Ellis ran in different directions, screaming insults at the Colossus and waving their arms. This bought the rest of us a few seconds as we sprinted for the dunes, but I suspected the Colossus would soon enough come after me. I was, after all, the most important and attractive target.

I pointed toward Sherman Yang's chariot, which was still circling the statue's legs in a vain attempt to electrocute its kneecaps. "We need to commandeer that chariot!"

"How?" Kayla asked.

I was about to admit I had no idea when Nico di Angelo grabbed Will's hand and stepped into my shadow. Both boys evaporated. I had forgotten about the power of shadow-traveling—the way children of the Underworld could step into one shadow and appear from another, sometimes hundreds of miles away. Hades used to love sneaking up on me that way and yelling, "HI!" just as I shot an arrow of death. He found it amusing if I missed my target and accidentally wiped out the wrong city.

Austin shuddered. "I hate it when Nico disappears like that. What's our plan?"

"You two are my backup," I said. "If I miss, if I die…it will be up to you."

"Whoa, whoa," Kayla said. "What do you mean *if you miss*?"

I drew my last arrow—the one I'd found in the grove. "I'm going to shoot that gorgeous gargantuan in the ear."

Austin and Kayla exchanged looks, perhaps wondering if I'd finally cracked under the strain of being mortal.

“A plague arrow,” I explained. “I’m going to enchant an arrow with sickness, then shoot it into the statue’s ear. Its head is hollow. The ears are the only openings. The arrow should release enough disease to kill the Colossus’s animating power…or at least to disable it.”

“How do you know it will work?” Kayla asked.

“I don’t, but—”

Our conversation was ruined by a sudden heavy downpour of Colossus foot. We darted inland, barely avoiding being flattened.

Behind us, Miranda shouted, “Hey, ugly!”

I knew she wasn’t talking to me, but I glanced back anyway. She raised her arms, causing ropes of sea grass to spring from the dunes and wrap around the statue’s ankles. The Colossus broke through them easily, but they annoyed him enough to be a distraction. Watching Miranda face the statue made me heartsick for Meg all over again.

Meanwhile, Ellis and Cecil stood on either side of the Colossus, throwing rocks at his shins. From the camp, a volley of flaming ballista projectiles exploded against Mr. Gorgeous’s naked backside, which made me clench in sympathy.

“You were saying?” Austin asked.

“Right.” I twirled the arrow between my fingers. “I know what you’re thinking. I don’t have godly powers. It’s doubtful I’ll be able to cook up the Black Death or the Spanish Flu. But still, if I can make the shot from close range, straight into its head, I might be able to do some damage.”

“And…if you fail?” Kayla asked. I noticed her quiver was also empty.

“I won’t have the strength to try twice. You’ll have to make another pass. Find an arrow, try to summon some sickness, make the shot while Austin holds the chariot steady.”

I realized this was an impossible request, but they accepted it with grim silence. I wasn’t sure whether to feel grateful or guilty. Back when I was a god, I would’ve taken it for granted that mortals had faith in me. Now…I was asking my children to risk their lives again, and I was not at all sure my plan would work.

I caught a flash of movement in the sky. This time, instead of a Colossus foot, it was Sherman Yang’s chariot, minus Sherman Yang. Will brought the pegasi in for a landing, then dragged out a half-conscious Nico di Angelo.

“Where are the others?” Kayla asked. “Sherman and the Hermes girls?”

Will rolled his eyes. “Nico convinced them to disembark.”

As if on cue, I heard Sherman screaming from somewhere far in the distance, “I’ll get you, di Angelo!”

“You guys go,” Will told me. “The chariot is only designed for three, and after that shadow-travel, Nico is going to pass out any second.”

“No, I’m not,” Nico complained, then passed out.

Will caught him in a fireman’s carry and took him away. “Good luck! I’m going to get the Lord of Darkness here some Gatorade!”

Austin hopped in first and took the reins. As soon as Kayla and I were aboard, we shot skyward, the pegasi swerving and banking around the Colossus with expert skill. I began to feel a glimmer of hope. We might be able to outmaneuver this giant hunk of good-looking bronze.

“Now,” I said, “if I can just enchant this arrow with a nice plague.”

The arrow shuddered from its fletching to its point.

THOU SHALT NOT, it told me.

I try to avoid weapons that talk. I find them rude and distracting. Once, Artemis had a bow that could cuss like a Phoenician sailor. Another time, in a Stockholm tavern, I met this god who was smoking hot, except his talking sword just would *not* shut up.

But I digress.

I asked the obvious question. “Did you just speak to me?”

The arrow quivered. (Oh, dear. That was a horrible pun. My apologies.) *YEA, VERILY. PRITHEE, SHOOTING IS NOT MY PURPOSE.*

His voice was definitely male, sonorous and grave, like a bad Shakespearean actor’s.

“But you’re an arrow,” I said. “Shooting you is the whole point.” (Ah, I really must watch those puns.)

“Guys, hang on!” Austin shouted.

The chariot plunged to avoid the Colossus’s swinging rudder. Without Austin’s warning, I would have been left in midair still arguing with my projectile.

“So you’re made from Dodona oak,” I guessed. “Is that why you talk?”

FORSOOTH, said the arrow.

“Apollo!” Kayla said. “I’m not sure why you’re talking to that arrow, but—”

From our right came a reverberating *WHANG!* like a snapped power line hitting a metal roof. In a flash of silver light, the camp’s magical barriers collapsed. The Colossus lurched forward and brought his foot down on the dining pavilion, smashing it to rubble like so many children’s blocks.

“But that just happened,” Kayla said with a sigh.

The Colossus raised his rudder in triumph. He marched inland, ignoring the

campers who were running around his feet. Valentina Diaz launched a ballista missile into his groin. (Again, I had to wince in sympathy.) Harley and Connor Stoll kept blowtorching his feet, to no effect. Nyssa, Malcolm, and Chiron hastily ran a trip line of steel cable across the statue's path, but they would never have time to anchor it properly.

I turned to Kayla. "You can't hear this arrow talking?"

Judging from her wide eyes, I guessed the answer was, *No, and does hallucinating run in the family?*

"Never mind." I looked at the arrow. "What would you suggest, O Wise Missile of Dodona? My quiver is empty."

The arrow's point dipped toward the statue's left arm. *LO, THE ARMPIT DOTH HOLD THE ARROWS THOU NEEDEST!*

Kayla yelled, "Colossus is heading for the cabins!"

"Armpit!" I told Austin. "Flieth—er, fly for the armpit!"

That wasn't an order one heard much in combat, but Austin spurred the pegasi into a steep ascent. We buzzed the forest of arrows sticking out of the Colossus's arm seam, but I completely overestimated my mortal hand-eye coordination. I lunged for the shafts and came up empty.

Kayla was more agile. She snagged a fistful but screamed when she yanked them free.

I pulled her to safety. Her hand was bleeding badly, cut from the high-speed grab.

"I'm fine!" Kayla yelped. Her fingers were clenched, splattering drops of red all over the chariot's floor. "Take the arrows."

I did. I tugged the Brazilian-flag bandana from around my neck and gave it to her. "Bind your hand," I ordered. "There's some ambrosia in my coat pocket."

"Don't worry about me." Kayla's face was as green as her hair. "Make the shot! Hurry!"

I inspected the arrows. My heart sank. Only one of the missiles was unbroken, and its shaft was warped. It would be almost impossible to shoot.

I looked again at the talking arrow.

THOU SHALT NOT THINKEST ABOUT IT, he intoned. *ENCHANT THOU THE WARPED ARROW!*

I tried. I opened my mouth, but the proper words of enchantment were gone from my mind. As I feared, Lester Papadopoulos simply did not possess the power. "I can't!"

I SHALT ASSIST, promised the Arrow of Dodona. *STARTEST THOU: "PLAGUEY, PLAGUEY, PLAGUEY."*

"The enchantment does *not* start *plaguey, plaguey, plaguey*!"

“Who are you talking to?” Austin demanded.

“My arrow! I—I need more time.”

“We don’t *have* more time!” Kayla pointed with her wrapped bloody hand.

The Colossus was only a few steps away from the central green. I wasn’t sure the demigods even realized how much danger they were in. The Colossus could do much more than just flatten buildings. If he destroyed the central hearth, the sacred shrine of Hestia, he would extinguish the very soul of the camp. The valley would be cursed and uninhabitable for generations. Camp Half-Blood would cease to exist.

I realized I had failed. My plan would take much too long, if I could even *remember* how to make a plague arrow. This was my punishment for breaking an oath on the River Styx.

Then, from somewhere above us, a voice yelled, “Hey, Bronze Butt!”

Over the Colossus’s head, a cloud of darkness formed like a cartoon dialogue bubble. Out of the shadows dropped a furry black monster dog—a hellhound—and astride his back was a young man with a glowing bronze sword.

The weekend was here. Percy Jackson had arrived.

37

Hey, look! It's Percy
Least he could do was help out
Taught him everything

I WAS TOO SURPRISED TO SPEAK. Otherwise I would have warned Percy what was about to happen.

Hellhounds are not fond of heights. When startled, they respond in a predictable way. The moment Percy's faithful pet landed on top of the moving Colossus, she yelped and proceeded to wee-wee on said Colossus's head. The statue froze and looked up, no doubt wondering what was trickling down his imperial sideburns.

Percy leaped heroically from his mount and slipped in hellhound pee. He nearly slid off the statue's brow. "What the—Mrs. O'Leary, jeez!"

The hellhound bayed in apology. Austin flew our chariot to within shouting distance. "Percy!"

The son of Poseidon frowned across at us. "All right, who unleashed the giant bronze guy? Apollo, did you do this?"

"I am offended!" I cried. "I am only indirectly responsible for this! Also, I have a plan to fix it."

"Oh, yeah?" Percy glanced back at the destroyed dining pavilion. "How's that going?"

With my usual levelheadedness, I stayed focused on the greater good. "If you could please just keep this Colossus from stomping the camp's hearth, that would be helpful. I need a few more minutes to enchant this arrow."

I held up the talking arrow by mistake, then held up the bent arrow.

Percy sighed. "Of course you do."

Mrs. O'Leary barked in alarm. The Colossus was raising his hand to swat the trespassing tinkler.

Percy grabbed one of the crown's sunray spikes. He sliced it off at the base, then jabbed it into the Colossus's forehead. I doubted the Colossus could feel pain, but it staggered, apparently surprised to suddenly have grown a unicorn horn.

Percy sliced off another one. "Hey, ugly!" he called down. "You don't need all these pointy things, do you? I'm going to take one to the beach. Mrs. O'Leary, fetch!"

Percy tossed the spike like a javelin.

The hellhound barked excitedly. She leaped off the Colossus's head, vaporized into shadow, and reappeared on the ground, bounding after her new bronze stick.

Percy raised his eyebrows at me. "Well? Start enchanting!"

He jumped from the statue's head to its shoulder. Then he leaped to the shaft of the rudder and slid down it like a fire pole all the way to the ground. If I had been at my usual level of godly athletic skill, I could've done something like that in my sleep, of course, but I had to admit Percy Jackson was moderately impressive.

"Hey, Bronze Butt!" he yelled again. "Come get me!"

The Colossus obliged, slowly turning and following Percy toward the beach.

I began to chant, invoking my old powers as the god of plagues. This time, the words came to me. I didn't know why. Perhaps Percy's arrival had given me new faith. Perhaps I simply didn't think about it too much. I've found that thinking often interferes with doing. It's one of those lessons that gods learn early in their careers.

I felt an itchy sensation of sickness curling from my fingers and into the projectile. I spoke of my own awesomeness and the various horrible diseases I had visited upon wicked populations in the past, because…well, I'm awesome. I could feel the magic taking hold, despite the Arrow of Dodona whispering to me like an annoying Elizabethan stagehand, *SAYEST THOU: "PLAGUEY, PLAGUEY, PLAGUEY!"*

Below, more demigods joined the parade to the beach. They ran ahead of the Colossus, jeering at him, throwing things, and calling him Bronze Butt. They made jokes about his new horn. They laughed at the hellhound pee trickling down his face. Normally I have zero tolerance for bullying, especially when the victim looks like me, but since the Colossus was ten stories tall and destroying their camp, I suppose the campers' rudeness was understandable.

I finished chanting. Odious green mist now wreathed the arrow. It smelled faintly of fast-food deep fryers—a good sign that it carried some sort of horrible malady.

“I’m ready!” I told Austin. “Get me next to its ear!”

“You got it!” Austin turned to say something else, and a wisp of green fog passed under his nose. His eyes watered. His nose swelled and began to run. He scrunched up his face and sneezed so hard he collapsed. He lay on the floor of the chariot, groaning and twitching.

“My boy!” I wanted to grab his shoulders and check on him, but since I had an arrow in each hand, that was inadvisable.

FIE! TOO STRONG IS THY PLAGUE. The Dodona arrow hummed with annoyance. *THY CHANTING SUCKETH.*

“Oh, no, no, no,” I said. “Kayla, be careful. Don’t breathe—”

“ACHOO!” Kayla crumpled next to her brother.

“What have I done?” I wailed.

METHINKS THOU HAST BLOWN IT, said the Dodona arrow, my source of infinite wisdom. *MOREO’ER, HIE! TAKEST THOU THE REINS.*

“Why?”

You would think a god who drove a chariot on a daily basis would not need to ask such a question. In my defense, I was distraught about my children lying half-conscious at my feet. I didn’t consider that no one was driving. Without anyone at the reins, the pegasi panicked. To avoid running into the huge bronze Colossus directly in their path, they dove toward the earth.

Somehow, I managed to react appropriately. (Three cheers for reacting appropriately!) I thrust both arrows into my quiver, grabbed the reins, and managed to level our descent just enough to prevent a crash landing. We bounced off a dune and swerved to a stop in front of Chiron and a group of demigods. Our entrance might have looked dramatic if the centrifugal force hadn’t thrown Kayla, Austin, and me from the chariot.

Did I mention I was grateful for soft sand?

The pegasi took off, dragging the battered chariot into the sky and leaving us stranded.

Chiron galloped to our side, a cluster of demigods in his wake. Percy Jackson ran toward us from the surf while Mrs. O’Leary kept the Colossus occupied with a game of keep-away. I doubt that would hold the statue’s interest very long, once he realized there was a group of targets right behind him, just perfect for stomping.

“The plague arrow is ready!” I announced. “We need to shoot it into the Colossus’s ear!”

My audience did not seem to take this as good news. Then I realized my chariot was gone. My bow was still in the chariot. And Kayla and Austin were quite obviously infected with whatever disease I had conjured up.

“Are they contagious?” Cecil asked.

“No!” I said. “Well…probably not. It’s the fumes from the arrow—”

Everyone backed away from me.

“Cecil,” Chiron said, “you and Harley take Kayla and Austin to the Apollo cabin for healing.”

“But they *are* the Apollo cabin,” Harley complained. “Besides, my flamethrower—”

“You can play with your flamethrower later,” Chiron promised. “Run along. There’s a good boy. The rest of you, do what you can to keep the Colossus at the water’s edge. Percy and I will assist Apollo.”

Chiron said the word *assist* as if it meant *slap upside the head with extreme prejudice*.

Once the crowd had dispersed, Chiron gave me his bow. “Make the shot.”

I stared at the massive composite recursive, which probably had a draw weight of a hundred pounds. “This is meant for the strength of a centaur, not a teen mortal!”

“You created the arrow,” he said. “Only you can shoot it without succumbing to the disease. Only you can hit such a target.”

“From *here*? It’s impossible! Where is that flying boy, Jason Grace?”

Percy wiped the sweat and sand from his neck. “We’re fresh out of flying boys. And all the pegasi have stampeded.”

“Perhaps if we got some harpies and some kite string…” I said.

“Apollo,” Chiron said, “you must do this. You are the lord of archery and illness.”

“I’m not lord of anything!” I wailed. “I’m a stupid ugly mortal teenager! I’m *nobody*!”

The self-pity just came pouring out. I thought for sure the earth would split in two when I called myself a *nobody*. The cosmos would stop turning. Percy and Chiron would rush to reassure me.

None of that happened. Percy and Chiron just stared at me grimly.

Percy put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re Apollo. We need you. You can do this. Besides, if you don’t, I will personally throw you off the top of the Empire State Building.”

This was exactly the pep talk I needed—just the sort of thing Zeus used to say to me before my soccer matches. I squared my shoulders. “Right.”

“We’ll try to draw him into the water,” Percy said. “I’ve got the advantage there. Good luck.”

Percy accepted Chiron’s hand and leaped onto the centaur’s back. Together they galloped into the surf, Percy waving his sword and calling out various

bronze-butt-themed insults to the Colossus.

I ran down the beach until I had a line of sight on the statue's left ear.

Looking up at that regal profile, I did not see Nero. I saw myself—a monument to my own conceit. Nero's pride was no more than a reflection of mine. I was the bigger fool. I was exactly the sort of person who would construct a hundred-foot-tall naked statue of myself in my front yard.

I pulled the plague arrow from my quiver and nocked it in the bowstring.

The demigods were getting very good at scattering. They continued to harry the Colossus from both sides while Percy and Chiron galloped through the tide, Mrs. O'Leary romping at their heels with her new bronze stick.

"Yo, ugly!" Percy shouted. "Over here!"

The Colossus's next step displaced several tons of salt water and made a crater large enough to swallow a pickup truck.

The Arrow of Dodona rattled in my quiver. *RELEASE THY BREATH,* he advised. *DROPETH THY SHOULDER.*

"I *have* shot a bow before," I grumbled.

MINDETH THY RIGHT ELBOW, the arrow said.

"Shut up."

AND TELLEST NOT THINE ARROW TO SHUT UP.

I drew the bow. My muscles burned as if boiling water was being poured over my shoulders. The plague arrow did not make me pass out, but its fumes were disorienting. The warp of the shaft made my calculations impossible. The wind was against me. The arc of the shot would be much too high.

Yet I aimed, exhaled, and released the bowstring.

The arrow twirled as it rocketed upward, losing force and drifting too far to the right. My heart sank. Surely the curse of the River Styx would deny me any chance at success.

Just as the projectile reached its apex and was about to fall back to earth, a gust of wind caught it…perhaps Zephyros looking kindly on my pitiful attempt. The arrow sailed into the Colossus's ear canal and rattled in his head with a *clink, clink, clink* like a pachinko machine.

The Colossus halted. He stared at the horizon as if confused. He looked at the sky, then arched his back and lurched forward, making a sound like a tornado ripping off the roof of a warehouse. Because his face had no other open orifices, the pressure of his sneeze forced geysers of motor oil out his ears, spraying the dunes with environmentally unfriendly sludge.

Sherman, Julia, and Alice stumbled over to me, covered head to toe with

sand and oil.

"I appreciate you freeing Miranda and Ellis," Sherman snarled, "but I'm going to kill you later for taking my chariot. What did you do to that Colossus? What kind of plague makes you sneeze?"

"I'm afraid I—I summoned a rather benign illness. I believe I have given the Colossus a case of hay fever."

You know that horrible pause when you're waiting for someone to sneeze? The statue arched his back again, and everyone on the beach cringed in anticipation. The Colossus inhaled several cubic acres of air through his ear canals, preparing for his next blast.

I imagined the nightmare scenarios: The Colossus would ear-sneeze Percy Jackson into Connecticut, never to be seen again. The Colossus would clear his head and then stomp all of us flat. Hay fever could make a person cranky. I knew this because I *invented* hay fever. Still, I had never intended it to be a killing affliction. I certainly never anticipated facing the wrath of a towering metal automaton with extreme seasonal allergies. I cursed my shortsightedness! I cursed my mortality!

What I had *not* considered was the damage our demigods had already done to the Colossus's metal joints—in particular, his neck.

The Colossus rocked forward with a mighty *CHOOOOO!* I flinched and almost missed the moment of truth when the statue's head achieved first-stage separation from his body. It hurtled over Long Island Sound, the face spinning in and out of view. It hit the water with a mighty *WHOOSH* and bobbed for a moment. Then the air *blooped* out of its neck hole and the gorgeous regal visage of yours truly sank beneath the waves.

The statue's decapitated body tilted and swayed. If it had fallen backward, it might have crushed even more of the camp. Instead, it toppled forward. Percy yelped a curse that would have made any Phoenician sailor proud. Chiron and he raced sideways to avoid being crushed while Mrs. O'Leary wisely dissolved into shadows. The Colossus hit the water, sending forty-foot tidal waves to port and starboard. I had never before seen a centaur hang hooves on a tubular crest, but Chiron acquitted himself well.

The roar of the statue's fall finally stopped echoing off the hills.

Next to me, Alice Miyazawa whistled. "Well, that de-escalated quickly."

Sherman Yang asked in a voice of childlike wonder: "What the Hades just happened?"

"I believe," I said, "the Colossus sneezed his head off."

38

After the sneezing
Healing peeps, parsing limericks
Worst God Award? Me

THE PLAGUE SPREAD.

That was the price of our victory: a massive outbreak of hay fever. By nightfall, most of the campers were dizzy, groggy, and heavily congested, though I was pleased that none of them sneezed their heads off, because we were running low on bandages and duct tape.

Will Solace and I spent the evening caring for the wounded. Will took the lead, which was fine with me; I was exhausted. Mostly I splinted arms, distributed cold medicine and tissues, and tried to keep Harley from stealing the infirmary's entire supply of smiley-face stickers, which he plastered all over his flamethrower. I was grateful for the distraction, since it kept me from thinking too much about the day's painful events.

Sherman Yang graciously agreed not to kill Nico for tossing him out of his chariot, or me for damaging it, though I had the feeling the son of Ares was keeping his options open for later.

Chiron provided healing poultices for the most extreme cases of hay fever. This included Chiara Benvenuti, whose good luck had, for once, abandoned her. Strangely enough, Damien White got sick right after he learned that Chiara was sick. The two had cots next to each other in the infirmary, which I found a little suspicious, even though they kept sniping at each other whenever they knew they were being watched.

Percy Jackson spent several hours recruiting whales and hippocampi to help him haul away the Colossus. He decided it would be easiest to tow it underwater to Poseidon's palace, where it could be repurposed as garden statuary. I was not sure how I felt about that. I imagined Poseidon would replace the statue's

gorgeous face with his own weathered, bearded mien. Still, I wanted the Colossus gone, and I doubted it would have fit in the camp's recycling bins.

Thanks to Will's healing and a hot dinner, the demigods I had rescued from the woods quickly got back to full strength. (Paolo claimed it was because he waved a Brazilian-flag bandana over them, and I was not about to argue.)

As for the camp itself, the damage might have been much worse. The canoe dock could be rebuilt. The Colossus's footstep craters could be repurposed as convenient foxholes or koi ponds.

The dining pavilion was a total loss, but Nyssa and Harley were confident that Annabeth Chase could redesign the place next time she was here. With luck, it would be rebuilt in time for the summer.

The only other major damage was to the Demeter cabin. I had not realized it during the battle, but the Colossus had managed to step on it before turning around for the beach. In retrospect, its path of destruction appeared almost purposeful, as if the automaton had waded ashore, stomped Cabin Four, and headed back out to sea.

Given what had happened with Meg McCaffrey, I had a hard time not seeing this as a bad omen. Miranda Gardiner and Billie Ng were given temporary bunks in the Hermes cabin, but for a long time that night they sat stunned among the smashed ruins as daisies popped up all around them from the cold winter ground.

Despite my exhaustion, I slept fitfully. I did not mind Kayla and Austin's constant sneezing, or Will's gentle snoring. I did not even mind the hyacinths blooming in the windowsill, filling the room with their melancholy perfume. But I could not stop thinking of the dryads raising their arms to the flames in the woods, and about Nero, and Meg. The Arrow of Dodona stayed silent, hanging in my quiver on the wall, but I suspected it would have more annoying Shakespearean advice soon. I did not relish what it might telleth me about my future.

At sunrise, I rose quietly, took my bow and quiver and combat ukulele, and hiked to the summit of Half-Blood Hill. The guardian dragon, Peleus, did not recognize me. When I came too close to the Golden Fleece, he hissed, so I had to sit some distance away at the foot of the Athena Parthenos.

I didn't mind not being recognized. At the moment, I did not *want* to be Apollo. All the destruction I saw below me…it was my fault. I had been blind and complacent. I had allowed the emperors of Rome, including one of my own descendants, to rise to power in the shadows. I had let my once-great network of Oracles collapse until even Delphi was lost. I had almost caused the death of Camp Half-Blood itself.

And Meg McCaffrey…Oh, Meg, where were you?

Do what you need to do, she had told me. *That's my final order.*

Her order had been vague enough to allow me to pursue her. After all, we were bound together now. What I *needed to do* was to find her. I wondered if Meg had phrased her order that way on purpose, or if that was just wishful thinking on my part.

I gazed up at the serene alabaster face of Athena. In real life, she didn't look so pale and aloof—well, not most of the time, anyway. I pondered why the sculptor, Phidias, had chosen to make her look so unapproachable, and whether Athena approved. We gods often debated how much humans could change our very nature simply by the way they pictured us or imagined us. During the eighteenth century, for instance, I could not escape the white powdered wig, no matter how hard I tried. Among immortals, our reliance on humans was an uncomfortable subject.

Perhaps I deserved my present form. After my carelessness and foolishness, perhaps humanity *should* see me as nothing but Lester Papadopoulos.

I heaved a sigh. "Athena, what would you do in my place? Something wise and practical, I suppose."

Athena offered no response. She stared calmly at the horizon, taking the long view, as always.

I didn't need the wisdom goddess to tell me what I must do. I should leave Camp Half-Blood immediately, before the campers woke. They had taken me in to protect me, and I had nearly gotten them all killed. I couldn't bear to endanger them any longer.

But, oh, how I wanted to stay with Will, Kayla, Austin—my mortal children. I wanted to help Harley put smiley faces on his flamethrower. I wanted to flirt with Chiara and steal her away from Damien…or perhaps steal Damien away from Chiara, I wasn't sure yet. I wanted to improve my music and archery through that strange activity known as *practice*. I wanted to have a home.

Leave, I told myself. *Hurry.*

Because I was a coward, I waited too long. Below me, the cabin lights flickered on. Campers emerged from their doorways. Sherman Yang began his morning stretches. Harley jogged around the green, holding his Leo Valdez beacon high with the hope it would finally work.

At last, a pair of familiar figures spotted me. They approached from different directions—the Big House and Cabin Three—hiking up the hill to see me: Rachel Dare and Percy Jackson.

"I know what you're thinking," Rachel said. "Don't do it."

I feigned surprise. “Can you read my mind, Miss Dare?”

“I don’t need to. I know you, Lord Apollo.”

A week ago, the idea would have made me laugh. A mortal could not *know* me. I had lived for four millennia. Merely looking upon my true form would have vaporized any human. Now, though, Rachel’s words seemed perfectly reasonable. With Lester Papadopoulos, what you saw was what you got. There really wasn’t much to know.

“Don’t call me *Lord*,” I sighed. “I am just a mortal teen. I do not belong at this camp.”

Percy sat next to me. He squinted at the sunrise, the sea breeze tousling his hair. “Yeah, I used to think I didn’t belong here either.”

“It’s not the same,” I said. “You humans change and grow and mature. Gods do not.”

Percy faced me. “You sure about that? You seem pretty different.”

I think he meant that as a compliment, but I didn’t find his words reassuring. If I was becoming more fully human, that was hardly a cause for celebration. True, I had mustered a few godly powers at important moments—a burst of divine strength against the Germani, a hay fever arrow against the Colossus—but I could not rely on those abilities. I didn’t even understand how I had summoned them. The fact that I had limits, and that I couldn’t be sure where those limits *were*…Well, that made me feel much more like Lester Papadopoulos than Apollo.

“The other Oracles must be found and secured,” I said. “I cannot do that unless I leave Camp Half-Blood. And I cannot risk anyone else’s life.”

Rachel sat on my other side. “You sound certain. Did you get a prophecy from the grove?”

I shuddered. “I fear so.”

Rachel cupped her hands on her knees. “Kayla said you were talking to an arrow yesterday. I’m guessing it’s wood from Dodona?”

“Wait,” Percy said. “You found a talking arrow that gave you a prophecy?”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “The arrow talks, but I got the prophecy from the grove itself. The Arrow of Dodona just gives random advice. He’s quite annoying.”

The arrow buzzed in my quiver.

“At any rate,” I continued, “I must leave the camp. The Triumvirate means to possess all the ancient Oracles. I have to stop them. Once I have defeated the former emperors…only then will I be able to face my old enemy Python and free the Oracle of Delphi. After that…if I survive…perhaps Zeus will restore me to Olympus.”

Rachel tugged at a strand of her hair. “You know it’s too dangerous to do all that alone, right?”

“Listen to her,” Percy urged. “Chiron told me about Nero and this weird holding company of his.”

“I appreciate the offer of assistance, but—”

“Whoa.” Percy held up his hands. “Just to be clear, I’m not offering to go with you. I still have to finish my senior year, pass my DSTOMP and my SAT, and avoid getting killed by my girlfriend. But I’m sure we can get you some other helpers.”

“I’ll go,” Rachel said.

I shook my head. “My enemies would *love* to capture someone as dear to me as the priestess of Delphi. Besides, I need you and Miranda Gardiner to stay here and study the Grove of Dodona. For now, it is our only source of prophecy. And since our communication problems have not gone away, learning to use the grove’s power is all the more critical.”

Rachel tried to hide it, but I could see her disappointment in the lines around her mouth. “What about Meg?” she asked. “You’ll try to find her, won’t you?”

She might as well have plunged the Arrow of Dodona into my chest. I gazed at the woods—that hazy green expanse that had swallowed young McCaffrey. For a brief moment, I felt like Nero. I wanted to burn the whole place down.

“I will try,” I said, “but Meg doesn’t want to be found. She’s under the influence of her stepfather.”

Percy traced his finger across the Athena Parthenos’s big toe. “I’ve lost too many people to bad influence: Ethan Nakamura, Luke Castellan…We almost lost Nico, too….” He shook his head. “No. No more. You can’t give up on Meg. You guys are bound together. Besides, she’s one of the good guys.”

“I’ve known many of the good guys,” I said. “Most of them got turned into beasts, or statues, or—or trees….” My voice broke.

Rachel put her hand over mine. “Things can turn out differently, Apollo. That’s the nice thing about being human. We only have one life, but we can choose what kind of story it’s going to be.”

That seemed hopelessly optimistic. I had spent too many centuries watching the same patterns of behavior be repeated over and over, all by humans who thought they were being terribly clever and doing something that had never been done before. They thought they were crafting their own stories, but they were only tracing over the same old narratives, generation after generation.

Still…perhaps human persistence was an asset. They never seemed to give up hope. Every so often they *did* manage to surprise me. I never anticipated Alexander the Great, Robin Hood, or Billie Holiday. For that matter, I never

anticipated Percy Jackson and Rachel Elizabeth Dare.

"I—I hope you're right," I said.

She patted my hand. "Tell me the prophecy you heard in the grove."

I took a shaky breath. I didn't want to speak the words. I was afraid they might wake the grove and drown us in a cacophony of prophecies, bad jokes, and infomercials. But I recited the lines:

ıere once was a god named Apollo
ɔ plunged in a cave blue and hollow
ɔn a three-seater
bronze fire-eater
; forced death and madness to swallow"

Rachel covered her mouth. "A limerick?"

"I know!" I wailed. "I'm doomed!"

"Wait." Percy's eyes glittered. "Those lines…Do they mean what I think?"

"Well," I said, "I believe the blue cave refers to the Oracle of Trophonius. It was a…a very dangerous ancient Oracle."

"No," Percy said. "The *other* lines. *Three-seater*, *bronze fire-eater*, yadda yadda."

"Oh. I have no clue about those."

"Harley's beacon." Percy laughed, though I could not understand why he was so pleased. "He said you gave it a tuning adjustment? I guess that did the trick."

Rachel squinted at him. "Percy, what are you…" Her expression went slack. "Oh. *Oh*."

"Were there any other lines?" Percy urged. "Like, except for the limerick?"

"Several," I admitted. "Just bits and pieces I didn't understand. *The fall of the sun; the final verse.* Um, *Indiana, banana. Happiness approaches.* Something about *pages burning*."

Percy slapped his knee. "There you go. *Happiness approaches.* Happy is a name—well, the English version, anyway." He stood and scanned the horizon. His eyes fixed on something in the distance. A grin spread across his face. "Yep. Apollo, your escort is on the way."

I followed his gaze. Spiraling down from the clouds was a large winged creature that glinted of Celestial bronze. On its back were two human-size figures.

Their descent was silent, but in my mind a joyous fanfare of Valdezinator

music proclaimed the good news.

Leo had returned.

39

Want to hit Leo?
That is understandable
Hunk Muffin earned it

THE DEMIGODS HAD TO TAKE NUMBERS.

Nico commandeered a dispenser from the snack bar and carried it around, yelling, “The line starts to the left! Orderly queue, guys!”

“Is this really necessary?” Leo asked.

“Yes,” said Miranda Gardiner, who had drawn the first number. She punched Leo in the arm.

“Ow,” said Leo.

“You’re a jerk, and we all hate you,” said Miranda. Then she hugged him and kissed his cheek. “If you ever disappear like that again, we’ll line up to *kill you*.”

“Okay, okay!”

Miranda had to move on, because the line was getting pretty long behind her. Percy and I sat at the picnic table with Leo and his companion—none other than the immortal sorceress Calypso. Even though Leo was the one getting punched by everyone in camp, I was reasonably sure he was the *least* uncomfortable one at the table.

When they first saw each other, Percy and Calypso had hugged awkwardly. I hadn’t witnessed such a tense greeting since Patroclus met Achilles’s war prize, Briseis. (Long story. Juicy gossip. Ask me later.) Calypso had never liked me, so she pointedly ignored me, but I kept waiting for her to yell “BOO!” and turn me into a tree frog. The suspense was killing me.

Percy hugged Leo and didn’t even punch him. Still, the son of Poseidon looked disgruntled.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “Six months—”

“I told you,” Leo said. “We tried sending more holographic scrolls. We tried

Iris messages, dream visions, phone calls. Nothing worked.—Ow! Hey, Alice, how you doing?—Anyway, we ran into one crisis after another."

Calypso nodded. "Albania was particularly difficult."

From down the line, Nico di Angelo yelled, "Please do not mention Albania! Okay, who's next, folks? One line."

Damien White punched Leo's arm and walked away grinning. I wasn't sure Damien even knew Leo. He simply couldn't turn down a chance to punch someone.

Leo rubbed his bicep. "Hey, no fair. That guy's getting back in the line. So, like I was saying, if Festus hadn't picked up on that homing beacon yesterday, we'd still be flying around, looking for a way out of the Sea of Monsters."

"Oh, I hate that place," Percy said. "There's this big Cyclops, Polyphemus __"

"I know, right?" Leo agreed. "What is up with that guy's *breath*?"

"Boys," Calypso said, "perhaps we should focus on the present?"

She did not look at me, but I got the impression she meant *this silly former god and his problems.*

"Yeah," Percy said. "So the communication issues…Rachel Dare thinks it's got something to do with this company, Triumvirate."

Rachel herself had gone to the Big House to fetch Chiron, but Percy did a reasonable job summarizing what she had found out about the emperors and their evil corporation. Of course, we didn't know very much. By the time six more people had punched Leo in the arm, Percy had brought Leo and Calypso up to speed.

Leo rubbed his new bruises. "Man, why does it not surprise me that modern corporations are run by zombie Roman emperors?"

"They are not zombies," I said. "And I'm not sure they run *all* corporations __"

Leo waved away my explanation. "But they're trying to take over the Oracles."

"Yes," I agreed.

"And that's bad."

"Very."

"So you need our help.—Ow! Hey, Sherman. Where'd you get the new scar, dude?"

While Sherman told Leo the story of Crotchkicker McCaffrey and the Demon Peach Baby, I glanced at Calypso.

She looked very different from what I remembered. Her hair was still long and caramel brown. Her almond-shaped eyes were still dark and intelligent. But

now, instead of a *chiton* she wore modern jeans, a white blouse, and a shocking-pink ski jacket. She looked younger—about my mortal age. I wondered if she had been punished with mortality for leaving her enchanted island. If so, it didn't seem fair that she had retained her otherworldly beauty. She had neither flab nor acne.

As I watched, she stretched two fingers toward the opposite end of the picnic table, where a pitcher of lemonade sweated in the sunlight. I had seen her do this sort of thing before, willing her invisible aerial servants to whisk objects into her hands. This time, nothing happened.

A look of disappointment crossed her face. Then she realized I was watching. Her cheeks colored.

"Since leaving Ogygia, I have no powers," she admitted. "I am fully mortal. I keep hoping, but—"

"You want a drink?" Percy asked.

"I got it." Leo beat him to the pitcher.

I had not expected to feel sympathy for Calypso. We'd had harsh words in the past. A few millennia ago, I had opposed her petition for early release from Ogygia because of some…ah, drama between us. (Long story. Juicy gossip. Please *do not* ask me later.)

Still, as a fallen god, I understood how disconcerting it was to be without one's powers.

On the other hand, I was relieved. This meant she could not turn me into a tree frog or order her aerial servants to toss me off the Athena Parthenos.

"Here you go." Leo handed her a glass of lemonade. His expression seemed darker and more anxious, as if…Ah, of course. Leo had rescued Calypso from her prison island. In doing so, Calypso had lost her powers. Leo felt responsible.

Calypso smiled, though her eyes were still touched by melancholy. "Thank you, babe."

"Babe?" Percy asked.

Leo's expression brightened. "Yeah. She won't call me Hunk Muffin, though. I dunno why.—Ow!"

It was Harley's turn. The little boy punched Leo, then threw his arms around him and broke down sobbing.

"Hey, brother." Leo ruffled his hair and had the good sense to look ashamed. "You brought me home with that beacon of yours, H-Meister. You're a hero! You know I never would've left you hanging like that on purpose, don't you?"

Harley wailed and sniffled and nodded. Then he punched Leo again and ran away. Leo looked like he was about to get sick. Harley was quite strong.

"At any rate," Calypso said, "these problems with the Roman emperors—

how can we help?"

I raised my eyebrows. "You *will* help me, then? Despite…ah, well, I always knew you were kindhearted and forgiving, Calypso. I meant to visit you at Ogygia more often—"

"Spare me." Calypso sipped her lemonade. "I'll help you if *Leo* decides to help you, and he seems to have some affection for you. Why, I can't imagine."

I let go of the breath I had been holding for…oh, an hour. "I'm grateful. Leo Valdez, you have always been a gentleman and a genius. After all, you created the Valdezinator."

Leo grinned. "I did, didn't I? I suppose that was pretty awesome. So where is this next Oracle you—Ow!"

Nyssa had made it to the front of the line. She slapped Leo, then berated him in rapid Spanish.

"Yeah, okay, okay." Leo rubbed his face. "Dang, *hermana*, I love you, too!"

He turned his attention back to me. "So this next Oracle, you said it was where?"

Percy tapped the picnic table. "Chiron and I were talking about this. He figures this triumvirate thingie…they probably divided America into three parts, with one emperor in charge of each. We know Nero is holed up in New York, so we're guessing this next Oracle is in the second dude's territory, maybe in the middle third of the U.S."

"Oh, the middle third of the U.S.!" Leo spread his arms. "Piece of torta, then. We'll just search the entire middle of the country!"

"Still with the sarcasm," Percy noted.

"Hey, man, I've sailed with the most sarcastic scalawags on the high seas."

The two gave each other a high five, though I did not quite understand why. I thought about a snippet of prophecy I'd heard in the grove: something about Indiana. It might be a place to start….

The last person to come through the line was Chiron himself, pushed in his wheelchair by Rachel Dare. The old centaur gave Leo a warm, fatherly smile. "My boy, I am so pleased to have you back. And you freed Calypso, I see. Well done, and welcome, both of you!" Chiron spread his arms for a hug.

"Uh, thanks, Chiron." Leo leaned forward.

From underneath Chiron's lap blanket, his equine foreleg shot out and implanted a hoof in Leo's gut. Then, just as quickly, the leg disappeared. "Mr. Valdez," Chiron said in the same kindly tone, "if you ever pull a stunt like that again—"

"I got it, I got it!" Leo rubbed his stomach. "Dang, for a teacher, you got a heck of a high kick."

Rachel grinned and wheeled Chiron away. Calypso and Percy helped Leo to his feet.

"Yo, Nico," Leo called, "please tell me that's it for the physical abuse."

"For now." Nico smiled. "We're still trying to get in touch with the West Coast. You'll have a few dozen people out there who will definitely want to hit you."

Leo winced. "Yeah, that's something to look forward to. Well, I guess I'd better keep my strength up. Where do you guys eat lunch now that the Colossus stepped on the dining pavilion?"

Percy left that night just before dinner.

I expected a moving one-on-one farewell, during which he would ask my advice about test taking, being a hero, and living life in general. After he lent me his help in defeating the Colossus, it would have been the least I could do.

Instead, he seemed more interested in saying good-bye to Leo and Calypso. I wasn't part of their conversation, but the three of them seemed to reach some sort of mutual understanding. Percy and Leo embraced. Calypso even pecked Percy on the cheek. Then the son of Poseidon waded into Long Island Sound with his extremely large dog and they both disappeared underwater. Did Mrs. O'Leary swim? Did she travel through the shadows of whales? I did not know.

Like lunch, dinner was a casual affair. As darkness fell, we ate on picnic blankets around the hearth, which blazed with Hestia's warmth and kept away the winter chill. Festus the dragon sniffed around the perimeter of the cabins, occasionally blowing fire into the sky for no apparent reason.

"He got a little dinged up in Corsica," Leo explained. "Sometimes he spews randomly like that."

"He hasn't blowtorched anyone important yet," Calypso added, her eyebrow arched. "We'll see how he likes you."

Festus's red jewel eyes gleamed in the darkness. After driving the sun chariot for so long, I wasn't nervous about riding a metal dragon, but when I thought about what we'd be riding *toward*, geraniums bloomed in my stomach.

"I had planned to go alone," I told them. "The prophecy from Dodona speaks of the bronze fire-eater, but…it feels wrong for me to ask you to risk your lives. You have been through so much just to get here."

Calypso tilted her head. "Perhaps you *have* changed. That does not sound like the Apollo I remember. You definitely are not as handsome."

"I am still *quite* handsome," I protested. "I just need to clear up this acne."

She smirked. "So you haven't completely lost your big head."

“I beg your pardon?”

“Guys,” Leo interrupted, “if we’re going to travel together, let’s try to keep it friendly.” He pressed an ice pack to his bruised bicep. “Besides, we were planning to head west anyway. I got to find my peeps Jason and Piper and Frank and Hazel and…well, pretty much everybody at Camp Jupiter, I guess. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun?” I asked. “The Oracle of Trophonius will supposedly swallow me in death and madness. Even if I survive that, my other trials will no doubt be long, harrowing, and quite possibly fatal.”

“Exactly,” Leo said. “Fun. I don’t know about calling the whole quest thing *Apollo’s trials*, though. I think we should call it *Leo Valdez’s Victory Lap World Tour*.”

Calypso laughed and laced her fingers in Leo’s. She may not have been immortal anymore, but she still had a grace and easiness about her that I could not fathom. Perhaps she missed her powers, but she seemed genuinely happy to be with Valdez—to be young and mortal, even if it meant she could die at any moment.

Unlike me, she had *chosen* to become mortal. She knew that leaving Ogygia was a risk, but she had done it willingly. I didn’t know how she’d found the courage.

“Hey, man,” Leo told me. “Don’t look so glum. We’ll find her.”

I stirred. “What?”

“Your friend Meg. We’ll find her. Don’t worry.”

A bubble of darkness burst inside me. For once, I hadn’t been thinking of Meg. I’d been thinking about myself, and that made me feel guilty. Perhaps Calypso was right to question whether or not I’d changed.

I gazed at the silent forest. I remembered Meg dragging me to safety when I was cold and soaked and delirious. I remembered how fearlessly she fought the myrmekes, and how she’d ordered Peaches to extinguish the match when Nero wanted to burn his hostages, despite her fear of unleashing the Beast. I had to make her realize how evil Nero was. I had to find her. But how?

“Meg knows the prophecy,” I said. “If she tells Nero, he will know our plans as well.”

Calypso took a bite of her apple. “I missed the whole Roman Empire. How bad can one emperor be?”

“Bad,” I assured her. “And he is allied with two others. We don’t know which ones, but it’s safe to assume they are equally cutthroat. They’ve had centuries to amass fortunes, acquire property, build armies…Who knows what they are capable of?”

“Eh,” Leo said. “We took down Gaea in, like, forty seconds. This’ll be easy squeezy.”

I seemed to recall that the *lead-up* to the fight with Gaea had involved months of suffering and near misses with death. Leo, in fact, *had* died. I also wanted to remind him that the Triumvirate might well have orchestrated all our previous troubles with the Titans and giants, which would make them more powerful than anything Leo had ever faced.

I decided that mentioning these things might affect group morale.

“We’ll succeed,” Calypso said. “We must. So we will. I have been trapped on an island for thousands of years. I don’t know how long this mortal life will be, but I intend to live fully and without fear.”

“That’s my *mamacita*,” Leo said.

“What have I told you about calling me *mamacita*?”

Leo grinned sheepishly. “In the morning we’ll start getting our supplies together. As soon as Festus gets a tune-up and an oil change, we’ll be good to go.”

I considered what supplies I would take with me. I had depressingly little: some borrowed clothes, a bow, a ukulele, and an overly theatrical arrow.

But the real difficulty would be saying good-bye to Will, Austin, and Kayla. They had helped me so much, and they embraced me as family more than I had ever embraced *them*. Tears stung my eyes. Before I could start sobbing, Will Solace stepped into the light of the hearth. “Hey, everybody! We’ve started a bonfire in the amphitheater! Sing-along time. Come on!”

Groans were mixed in with the cheers, but most everyone got to their feet and ambled toward the bonfire now blazing in the distance, where Nico di Angelo stood silhouetted in the flames, preparing rows of marshmallows on what looked like femur bones.

“Aw, man.” Leo winced. “I’m terrible at sing-alongs. I always clap and do the ‘Old MacDonald’ sounds at the wrong time. Can we skip this?”

“Oh, no.” I rose to my feet, suddenly feeling better. Perhaps tomorrow I would weep and think about good-byes. Perhaps the day after that we would be flying toward our deaths. But tonight, I intended to enjoy my time with my family. What had Calypso said? *Live fully and without fear.* If she could do it, then so could the brilliant, fabulous Apollo. “Singing is good for the spirits. You should never miss an opportunity to sing.”

Calypso smiled. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but for once I agree with Apollo. Come on, Leo. I’ll teach you to harmonize.”

Together, the three of us walked toward the sounds of laughter, music, and a warm, crackling fire.

GUIDE TO APOLLO-SPEAK

Achilles the best fighter of the Greeks who besieged Troy in the Trojan War; extraordinarily strong, courageous, and loyal, he had only one weak spot: his heel

Admetus the king of Pherae in Thessaly; Zeus punished Apollo by sending him to work for Admetus as a shepherd

Aeolus the Greek god of the winds

Agamemnon king of Mycenae; the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War; courageous, but also arrogant and overly proud

agora Greek for *gathering place*; a central outdoor spot for athletic, artistic, spiritual, and political life in ancient Greek city-states

Ajax Greek hero with great strength and courage; fought in the Trojan War; used a large shield in battle

ambrosia food of the gods; has healing powers

amphitheater an oval or circular open-air space used for performances or sporting events, with spectator seating built in a semicircle around the stage

Aphrodite the Greek goddess of love and beauty

apodesmos a band of material that women in ancient Greece wore around the chest, particularly while participating in sports

Apollo the Greek god of the sun, prophecy, music, and healing; the son of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Artemis

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to

Athena

Argo the ship used by a band of heroes who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece

Argonauts a band of heroes who sailed with Jason on the *Argo*, in search of the Golden Fleece

Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Apollo

Asclepius the god of medicine; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing center of ancient Greece

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom

Athena Parthenos a giant statue of Athena; the most famous Greek statue of all time

ballista (**ballistae**, pl.) a Roman missile siege weapon that launched a large projectile at a distant target

Batavi an ancient tribe that lived in modern-day Germany; also an infantry unit in the Roman army with Germanic origins

Briseis a princess captured by Achilles during the Trojan War, causing a feud between Achilles and Agamemnon that resulted in Achilles refusing to fight alongside the Greeks

Bunker Nine a hidden workshop Leo Valdez discovered at Camp Half-Blood, filled with tools and weapons; it is at least two hundred years old and was used during the Demigod Civil War

Caesar Augustus the founder and first emperor of the Roman Empire; adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar (*see also* Octavian)

Calliope the muse of epic poetry; mother of several sons, including Orpheus

Calypso the goddess nymph of the mythical island of Ogygia; a daughter of the Titan Atlas; she detained the hero Odysseus for many years

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located in Long Island, New York

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills, in California

Cassandra the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba; had the gift of prophecy, but was cursed by Apollo so that her predictions were never believed, including her warning about the Trojan Horse

catapult a military machine used to hurl objects

Cave of Trophonius a deep chasm home to the Oracle Trophonius; its extremely narrow entrance required a visitor to lie flat on his back before being sucked into the cave; called “The Cave of Nightmares” due to the terrifying accounts of its visitors

Celestial bronze a rare metal deadly to monsters
centaur a race of creatures that is half-human, half-horse
Ceres the Roman god of agriculture; Greek form: Demeter
Chiron a centaur; the camp activities director at Camp Half-Blood
chiton a Greek garment; a sleeveless piece of linen or wool secured at the shoulders by brooches and at the waist by a belt
Chrysothemis a daughter of Demeter who won Apollo's love during a music contest
Circe a Greek goddess of magic
Cloacina goddess of the Roman sewer system
Clytemnestra the daughter of the king and queen of Sparta; married and later murdered Agamemnon
Colosseum an elliptical amphitheater in the center of Rome, Italy, capable of seating fifty thousand spectators; used for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles such as mock sea battles, animal hunts, executions, re-enactments of famous battles, and dramas
Colossus Neronis (Colossus of Nero) a gigantic bronze statue of Emperor Nero; was later transformed into the sun god with the addition of a sunray crown
Cretan of the island of Crete
Crommyon a village in ancient Greece where a giant wild sow wreaked havoc before it was killed by Theseus
cuirass leather or metal armor consisting of a breastplate and backplate worn by Greek and Roman soldiers; often highly ornamented and designed to mimic muscles
Cyclops (**Cyclopes,** pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead
Cyrene a fierce huntress with whom Apollo fell in love after he saw her wrestle a lion; Apollo later transformed her into a nymph in order to extend her life
Daedalus a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept
Daphne a beautiful naiad who attracted Apollo's attention; she was transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape him
Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos; Roman form: Ceres
dimachaerus a Roman gladiator trained to fight with two swords at once
Dionysus the Greek god of wine and revelry; the son of Zeus; activities director at Camp Half-Blood

Domus Aurea Emperor Nero's extravagant villa in the heart of ancient Rome, built after the Great Fire of Rome

Doors of Death the doorway to the House of Hades, located in Tartarus; doors have two sides—one in the mortal world, and one in the Underworld

drakon a gigantic yellow-and-green serpentlike monster, with frills around its neck, reptilian eyes, and huge talons; it spits poison

dryads tree nymphs

Erebos a place of darkness between earth and Hades

Eros the Greek god of love

Erythaea an island where the Cumaean Sibyl, a love interest of Apollo, originally lived before he convinced her to leave it by promising her a long life

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where people who were evil during their lives are sent to face eternal punishment for their crimes after death

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters

Germani (***Germanus***, sing.) tribal people who settled to the west of the Rhine river

Golden Fleece this hide from a gold-haired winged ram was a symbol of authority and kingship; it was guarded by a dragon and fire-breathing bulls; Jason was tasked with obtaining it, resulting in an epic quest

Gorgons three monstrous sisters (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa) who have hair of living, venomous snakes; Medusa's eyes can turn the beholder to stone

Great Fire of Rome a devastating fire that took place in 64 CE, lasting for six days; rumors indicated that Nero started the fire to clear space for the building of his villa, Domus Aurea, but he blamed the Christian community for the disaster

greaves shin armor

Greek fire an incendiary weapon used in naval battles because it can continue burning in water

Grove of Dodona the site of the oldest Greek Oracle, second only to the Delphi; the rustling of trees in the grove provided answers to priests and priestesses who journeyed to the site

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; ruler of the Underworld

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hebe the Greek goddess of youth; daughter of Zeus and Hera

Hecate goddess of magic and crossroads

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of

Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister

Hermes Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication

Herodotus a Greek historian known as the "Father of History"

Hestia Greek goddess of the hearth

hippocampi (**hippocampus**, sing.) half-horse, half-fish creatures

hippodrome an oval stadium for horse and chariot races in ancient Greece

Hittites a group of people who lived in modern Turkey and Syria; often in conflict with Egyptians; known for their use of chariots as assault weapons

House of Hades a place in the Underworld where Hades, the Greek god of death, and his wife, Persephone, rule over the souls of the departed

Hunters of Artemis a group of maidens loyal to Artemis and gifted with hunting skills and eternal youth as long as they reject men for life

Hyacinthus a Greek hero and Apollo's lover, who died while trying to impress Apollo with his discus skills

Hypnos the Greek god of sleep

ichor the golden fluid that is the blood of gods and immortals

imperator a term for *commander* in the Roman Empire

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Iris the Greek goddess of the rainbow, and a messenger of the gods

Julian dynasty the time period measured from the battle of Actium (31 BCE) to the death of Nero (68 CE)

karpoi (***karpos***, sing.) grain spirits

kouretes armored dancers who guarded the infant Zeus from his father, Kronos

Kronos the youngest of the twelve Titans; the son of Ouranos and Gaea; the father of Zeus; he killed his father at his mother's bidding; Titan lord of fate, harvest, justice, and time; Roman form: Saturn

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur

Laomedon a Trojan king whom Poseidon and Apollo were sent to serve after they offended Zeus

Lepidus a Roman patrician and military commander who was in a triumvirate with Octavian and Marc Antony

Leto mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood

Lupercalia a pastoral festival, observed on February 13 through 15, to avert evil spirits and purify the city, releasing health and fertility

Lydia a province in ancient Rome; the double ax originated there, along with

the use of coins and retail shops

Marc Antony a Roman politician and general; part of the triumvirate, with Lepidus and Octavian, who together tracked down and defeated Caesar's killers; had an enduring affair with Cleopatra

Marsyas a satyr who lost to Apollo after challenging him in a musical contest, which led to Marsyas being flayed alive

Medea a follower of Hecate and one of the great sorceresses of the ancient world

Midas a king with the power to transform anything he touched to gold; he selected Marsyas as the winner in the musical contest between Apollo and Marsyas, resulting in Apollo giving Midas the ears of a donkey

Minos king of Crete; son of Zeus; every year he made King Aegus pick seven boys and seven girls to be sent to the Labyrinth, where they would be eaten by the Minotaur; after his death he became a judge in the Underworld

Minotaur the half-man, half-bull son of King Minos of Crete; the Minotaur was kept in the Labyrinth, where he killed people who were sent in; he was finally defeated by Theseus

Mithridates king of Pontus and Armenia Minor in northern Anatolia (now Turkey) from about 120 to 63 BCE; one of the Roman Republic's most formidable and successful enemies, who engaged three of the prominent generals from the late Roman Republic in the Mithridatic Wars

Mount Olympus home of the Twelve Olympians

myrmeke a giant antlike creature that poisons and paralyzes its prey before eating it; known for protecting various metals, particularly gold

Nemesis the Greek goddess of revenge

Nero Roman emperor from 54 to 68 CE; the last in the Julian dynasty

New Rome a community near Camp Jupiter where demigods can live together in peace, without interference from mortals or monsters

Nike the Greek goddess of strength, speed, and victory

Nine Muses Greek goddesses of literature, science, and the arts, who have inspired artists and writers for centuries

Niobe daughter of Tantalus and Dione; suffered the loss of her six sons and six daughters, who were killed by Apollo and Artemis as a punishment for her pride

nosoi (***nosos***, sing.) spirits of plague and disease

nymph a female nature deity who animates nature

Octavian the founder and first emperor of the Roman Empire; adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar (*see also* Caesar Augustus)

Odysseus legendary Greek king of Ithaca and the hero of Homer's epic poem

The Odyssey

Ogygia the island home—and prison—of the nymph Calypso

omphalus stones used to mark the center—or navel—of the world

Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo

Oracle of Trophonius a Greek who was transformed into an Oracle after his death; located at the Cave of Trophonius; known for terrifying those who seek him

Ouranos the Greek personification of the sky; father of the Titans

palikoi (***palikos***, sing.) twin sons of Zeus and Thaleia; the gods of geysers and thermal springs

Pan the Greek god of the wild; the son of Hermes

Pandora the first human woman created by the gods; endowed with a unique gift from each; released evil into the world by opening a jar

Parthenon a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena located at the Athenian Acropolis in Greece

Patroclus son of Menoetius; he shared a deep friendship with Achilles after being raised alongside him; he was killed while fighting in the Trojan War

pegasus (**pegasi**, pl.) a winged divine horse; sired by Poseidon, in his role as horse-god

Peleus father of Achilles; his wedding to the sea-nymph Thetis was well attended by the gods, and a disagreement between them at the event eventually lead to the Trojan War; the guardian dragon at Camp Half-Blood is named after him

Persephone the Greek queen of the Underworld; wife of Hades; daughter of Zeus and Demeter

phalanx (**phalanxes**, pl.) a compact body of heavily armed troops

Phidias a famous ancient Greek sculptor who created the Athena Parthenos and many others

Polyphemus the gigantic one-eyed son of Poseidon and Thoosa; one of the Cyclopes

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

Primordial Chaos the first thing ever to exist; a void from which the first gods were produced

Prometheus the Titan who created humans and gifted them with fire stolen from Mount Olympus

Pythia the name given to every Oracle of Delphi

Python a monstrous serpent that Gaea appointed to guard the Oracle at Delphi

Rhea Silvia the queen of the Titans, mother of Zeus
Riptide the name of Percy Jackson's sword; *Anaklusmos* in Greek
River Styx the river that forms the boundary between earth and the Underworld
Saturnalia an ancient Roman festival celebrating Saturn (Kronos)
satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man
shadow-travel a form of transportation that allows creatures of the Underworld and children of Hades to use shadows to leap to any desired place on earth or in the Underworld, although it makes the user extremely fatigued
Sibyl a prophetess
Sibylline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek; Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, bought them from a prophetess and consulted them in times of great danger
siccae a short curved sword used for battle in ancient Rome
Sparta a city-state in ancient Greece with military dominance
Stygian iron a magical metal, forged in the River Styx, capable of absorbing the very essence of monsters and injuring mortals, gods, Titans, and giants; has a significant effect on ghosts and creatures from the Underworld
Talos a giant mechanical man made of bronze and used on Crete to guard its shoreline from invaders
Tantalus According to legend, this king was such a good friend of the gods that he was allowed to dine at their table—until he spilled their secrets on earth; he was sent to the Underworld, where his curse was to be stuck in a pool of water under a fruit tree, but never be able to drink or eat
Tartarus husband of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; a region of the Underworld
Theodosius the last to rule over the united Roman Empire; known for closing all ancient temples across the empire
Thracian of Thrace, a region centered on the modern borders of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey
Titan War the epic ten-year battle between the Titans and the Olympians that resulted in the Olympians taking the throne
Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Ouranos, that ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians
trireme a Greek warship, having three tiers of oars on each side
triumvirate a political alliance formed by three parties
Trojan War According to legend, the Trojan War was waged against the city

of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta

Troy a Roman city situated in modern-day Turkey; site of the Trojan War

Tyche the Greek goddess of good fortune; daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite

Typhon the most terrifying Greek monster; father of many famous monsters, including Cerberus, the vicious multi-headed dog tasked with guarding the entrance to the Underworld

Underworld the kingdom of the dead, where souls go for eternity; ruled by Hades

Zephyros the Greek god of the West Wind

Zeus the Greek god of the sky and the king of the gods

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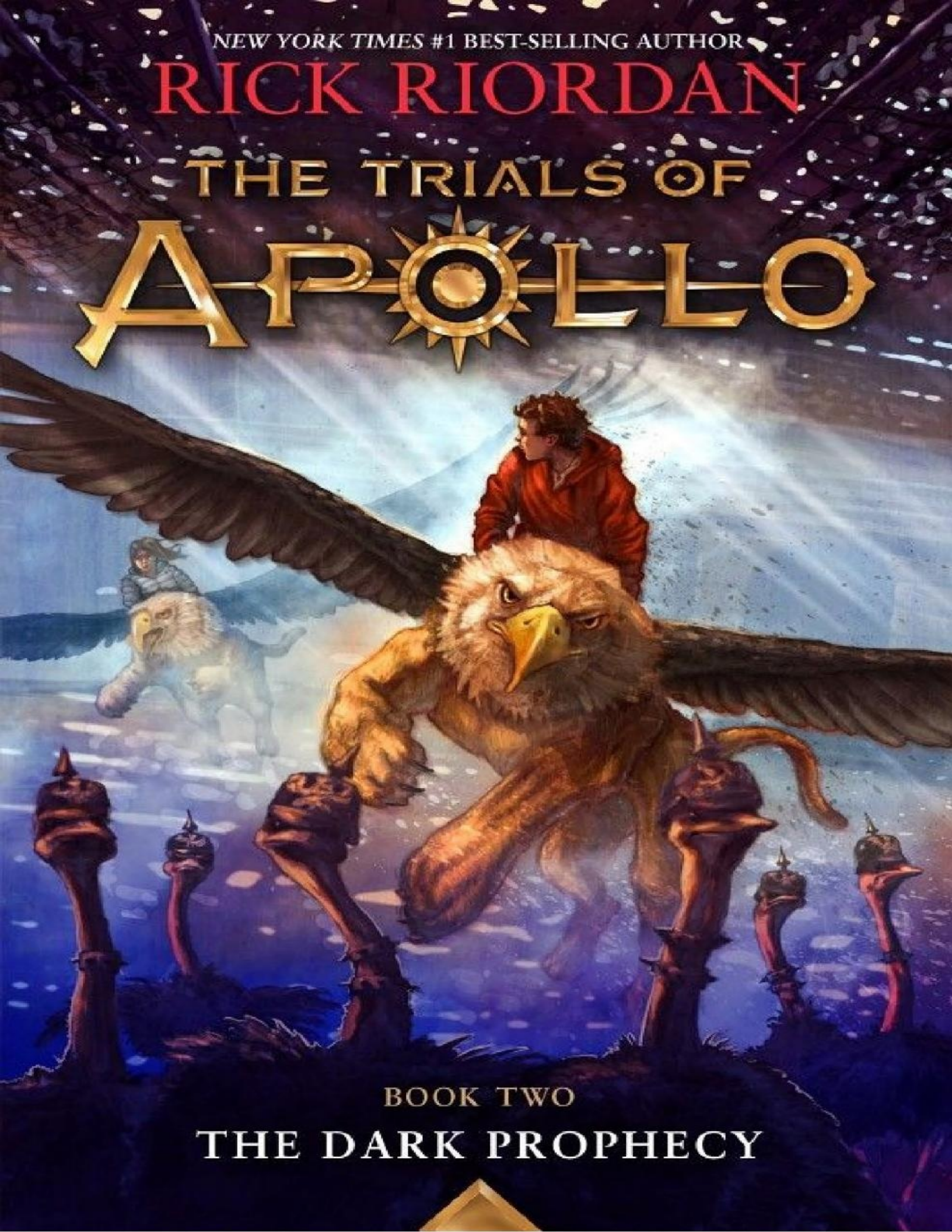
NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
RICK RIORDAN
THE TRIALS OF
APOLLO
BOOK TWO
THE DARK PROPHECY

RICK RIORDAN

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

2

THE DARK PROPHECY

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To Ursula K. Le Guin,
who taught me that rules change in the Reaches

1

Lester (Apollo)
Still human; thanks for asking
Gods, I hate my life

WHEN OUR DRAGON declared war on Indiana, I knew it was going to be a bad day.

We'd been traveling west for six weeks, and Festus had never shown such hostility toward a state. New Jersey he ignored. Pennsylvania he seemed to enjoy, despite our battle with the Cyclopes of Pittsburgh. Ohio he tolerated, even after our encounter with Potina, the Roman goddess of childhood drinks, who pursued us in the form of a giant red pitcher emblazoned with a smiley face.

Yet for some reason, Festus decided he did not like Indiana. He landed on the cupola of the Indiana Statehouse, flapped his metallic wings, and blew a cone of fire that incinerated the state flag right off the flagpole.

"Whoa, buddy!" Leo Valdez pulled the dragon's reins. "We've talked about this. No blowtorching public monuments!"

Behind him on the dragon's spine, Calypso gripped Festus's scales for balance. "Could we *please* get to the ground? *Gently* this time?"

For a formerly immortal sorceress who once controlled air spirits, Calypso was not a fan of flying. Cold wind blew her chestnut hair into my face, making me blink and spit.

That's right, dear reader.

I, the most important passenger, the youth who had once been the glorious god Apollo, was forced to sit in the back of the dragon. Oh, the indignities I had suffered since Zeus stripped me of my divine powers! It wasn't enough that I was now a sixteen-year-old mortal with the ghastly alias Lester Papadopoulos. It wasn't enough that I had to toil upon the earth doing (ugh) heroic quests until I could find a way back into my father's good graces, or that I had a case of acne which simply *would not* respond to over-the-counter zit medicine. Despite my

New York State junior driver's license, Leo Valdez didn't trust me to operate his aerial bronze steed!

Festus's claws scrabbled for a hold on the green copper dome, which was much too small for a dragon his size. I had a flashback to the time I installed a life-size statue of the muse Calliope on my sun chariot and the extra weight of the hood ornament made me nosedive into China and create the Gobi Desert.

Leo glanced back, his face streaked with soot. "Apollo, you sense anything?"

"Why is it *my* job to sense things? Just because I used to be a god of prophecy—"

"You're the one who's been having visions," Calypso reminded me. "You said your friend Meg would be here."

Just hearing Meg's name gave me a twinge of pain. "That doesn't mean I can pinpoint her location with my mind! Zeus has revoked my access to GPS!"

"GPS?" Calypso asked.

"Godly positioning systems."

"That's not a real thing!"

"Guys, cool it." Leo patted the dragon's neck. "Apollo, just try, will you? Does this look like the city you dreamed about or not?"

I scanned the horizon.

Indiana was flat country—highways crisscrossing scrubby brown plains, shadows of winter clouds floating above urban sprawl. Around us rose a meager cluster of downtown high-rises—stacks of stone and glass like layered wedges of black and white licorice. (Not the yummy kind of licorice, either; the nasty variety that sits for eons in your stepmother's candy bowl on the coffee table. And, no, Hera, why would I be talking about you?)

After falling to earth in New York City, I found Indianapolis desolate and uninspiring, as if one proper New York neighborhood—Midtown, perhaps—had been stretched out to encompass the entire area of Manhattan, then relieved of two-thirds of its population and vigorously power-washed.

I could think of no reason why an evil triumvirate of ancient Roman emperors would take interest in such a location. Nor could I imagine why Meg McCaffrey would be sent here to capture me. Yet my visions had been clear. I had seen this skyline. I had heard my old enemy Nero give orders to Meg: *Go west. Capture Apollo before he can find the next Oracle. If you cannot bring him to me alive, kill him.*

The truly sad thing about this? Meg was one of my better friends. She also happened to be my demigod master, thanks to Zeus's twisted sense of humor. As long as I remained mortal, Meg could order me to do anything, even kill myself….No. Better not to think of such possibilities.

I shifted in my metal seat. After so many weeks of travel, I was tired and saddle sore. I wanted to find a safe place to rest. *This* was not such a city. Something about the landscape below made me as restless as Festus.

Alas, I was sure this was where we were meant to be. Despite the danger, if I had a chance of seeing Meg McCaffrey again, of prying her away from her villainous stepfather's grasp, I had to try.

"This is the spot," I said. "Before this dome collapses under us, I suggest we get to the ground."

Calypso grumbled in ancient Minoan, "I already *said* that."

"Well, excuse me, sorceress!" I replied in the same language. "Perhaps if *you* had helpful visions, I'd listen to you more often!"

Calypso called me a few names that reminded me how colorful the Minoan language had been before it went extinct.

"Hey, you two," Leo said. "No ancient dialects. Spanish or English, please. Or Machine."

Festus creaked in agreement.

"It's okay, boy," Leo said. "I'm sure they didn't mean to exclude us. Now let's fly down to street level, huh?"

Festus's ruby eyes glowed. His metal teeth spun like drill bits. I imagined him thinking, *Illinois is sounding pretty good right about now.*

But he flapped his wings and leaped from the dome. We hurtled downward, landing in front of the statehouse with enough force to crack the sidewalk. My eyeballs jiggled like water balloons.

Festus whipped his head from side to side, steam curling from his nostrils.

I saw no immediate threats. Cars drove leisurely down West Washington Street. Pedestrians strolled by: a middle-aged woman in a flowery dress, a heavyset policeman carrying a paper coffee cup labeled CAFÉ PATACHOU, a clean-cut man in a blue seersucker suit.

The man in blue waved politely as he passed. "Morning."

"'Sup, dude," Leo called.

Calypso tilted her head. "Why was he so friendly? Does he not *see* that we're sitting atop a fifty-ton metal dragon?"

Leo grinned. "It's the Mist, babe—messes with mortal eyes. Makes monsters look like stray dogs. Makes swords look like umbrellas. Makes me look even more handsome than usual!"

Calypso jabbed her thumbs into Leo's kidneys.

"Ow!" he complained.

"I know what the Mist is, *Leonidas*—"

"Hey, I told you never to call me that."

"—but the Mist must be very strong here if it can hide a monster of Festus's size at such close range. Apollo, don't you find that a little odd?"

I studied the passing pedestrians.

True, I had seen places where the Mist was particularly heavy. At Troy, the sky above the battlefield had been so thick with gods you couldn't turn your chariot without running into another deity, yet the Trojans and Greeks saw only hints of our presence. At Three Mile Island in 1979, the mortals somehow failed to realize that their partial nuclear meltdown was caused by an epic chainsaw fight between Ares and Hephaestus. (As I recall, Hephaestus had insulted Ares's bell-bottom jeans.)

Still, I did not think heavy Mist was the problem here. Something about these locals bothered me. Their faces were too placid. Their dazed smiles reminded me of ancient Athenians just before the Dionysus Festival—everyone in a good mood, distracted, thinking about the drunken riots and debauchery to come.

"We should get out of the public eye," I suggested. "Perhaps—"

Festus stumbled, shaking like a wet dog. From inside his chest came a noise like a loose bicycle chain.

"Aw, not again," Leo said. "Everybody off!"

Calypso and I quickly dismounted.

Leo ran in front of Festus and held out his arms in a classic dragon-wrangler's stance. "Hey, buddy, it's fine! I'm just going to switch you off for a while, okay? A little downtime to—"

Festus projectile-vomited a column of flames that engulfed Leo. Fortunately, Valdez was fireproof. His clothes were not. From what Leo had told me, he could generally prevent his outfits from burning up simply by concentrating. If he were caught by surprise, however, it didn't always work.

When the flames dissipated, Leo stood before us wearing nothing but his asbestos boxer shorts, his magical tool belt, and a pair of smoking, partially melted sneakers.

"Dang it!" he complained. "Festus, it's cold out here!"

The dragon stumbled. Leo lunged and flipped the lever behind the dragon's left foreleg. Festus began to collapse. His wings, limbs, neck, and tail contracted into his body, his bronze plates overlapping and folding inward. In a matter of seconds, our robotic friend had been reduced to a large bronze suitcase.

That should have been physically impossible, of course, but like any decent god, demigod, or engineer, Leo Valdez refused to be stopped by the laws of physics.

He scowled at his new piece of luggage. "Man…I *thought* I fixed his gyro-

capacitor. Guess we're stuck here until I can find a machine shop."

Calypso grimaced. Her pink ski jacket glistened with condensation from our flight through the clouds. "And if we find such a shop, how long will it take to repair Festus?"

Leo shrugged. "Twelve hours? Fifteen?" He pushed a button on the side of the suitcase. A handle popped up. "Also, if we see a men's clothing store, that might be good."

I imagined walking into a T.J. Maxx, Leo in boxer shorts and melted sneakers, rolling a bronze suitcase behind him. I did not relish the idea.

Then, from the direction of the sidewalk, a voice called, "Hello!"

The woman in the flowery dress had returned. At least she *looked* like the same woman. Either that or lots of ladies in Indianapolis wore purple-and-yellow honeysuckle-pattern dresses and had 1950s bouffant hairstyles.

She smiled vacantly. "Beautiful morning!"

It was in fact a miserable morning—cold and cloudy with a smell of impending snow—but I felt it would be rude to ignore her completely.

I gave her a little parade wave—the sort of gesture I used to give my worshippers when they came to grovel at my altar. To me, the message was clear enough: *I see you, puny mortal; now run along. The gods are talking.*

The woman did not take the hint. She strolled forward and planted herself in front of us. She wasn't particularly large, but something about her proportions seemed off. Her shoulders were too wide for her head. Her chest and belly protruded in a lumpy mass, as if she'd stuffed a sack of mangos down the front of her dress. With her spindly arms and legs, she reminded me of some sort of giant beetle. If she ever tipped over, I doubted she could easily get back up.

"Oh, my!" She gripped her purse with both hands. "Aren't you children *cute*!"

Her lipstick and eye shadow were both a violent shade of purple. I wondered if she was getting enough oxygen to her brain.

"Madam," I said, "we are not children." I could have added that I was over four thousand years old, and Calypso was even older, but I decided not to get into that. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a suitcase to repair and my friend is in dire need of a pair of pants."

I tried to step around her. She blocked my path.

"You can't go yet, dear! We haven't welcomed you to Indiana!" From her purse, she drew a smartphone. The screen glowed as if a call were already in progress.

"It's him, all right," she said into the phone. "Everybody, come on over. Apollo is here!"

My lungs shriveled in my chest.

In the old days, I would have expected to be recognized as soon as I arrived in a town. *Of course* the locals would rush to welcome me. They would sing and dance and throw flowers. They would immediately begin constructing a new temple.

But as Lester Papadopoulos, I did not warrant such treatment. I looked nothing like my former glorious self. The idea that the Indianans might recognize me despite my tangled hair, acne, and flab was both insulting and terrifying. What if they erected a statue of me in my present form—a giant golden Lester in the center of their city? The other gods would never let me hear the end of it!

"Madam," I said, "I'm afraid you have mistaken me—"

"Don't be modest!" The woman tossed her phone and purse aside. She grabbed my forearm with the strength of a weightlifter. "Our master will be delighted to have you in custody. And please call me Nanette."

Calypso charged. Either she wished to defend me (unlikely), or she was not a fan of the name Nanette. She punched the woman in the face.

This by itself did not surprise me. Having lost her immortal powers, Calypso was in the process of trying to master other skills. So far, she'd failed at swords, polearms, shurikens, whips, and improvisational comedy. (I sympathized with her frustration.) Today, she'd decided to try fisticuffs.

What surprised me was the loud *CRACK* her fist made against Nanette's face—the sound of finger bones breaking.

"Ow!" Calypso stumbled away, clutching her hand.

Nanette's head slid backward. She released me to try to grab her own face, but it was too late. Her head toppled off her shoulders. It clanged against the pavement and rolled sideways, the eyes still blinking, the purple lips twitching. Its base was smooth stainless steel. Attached to it were ragged strips of duct tape stuck with hair and bobby pins.

"Holy Hephaestus!" Leo ran to Calypso's side. "Lady, you broke my girlfriend's hand with your face. What *are* you, an automaton?"

"No, dear," said decapitated Nanette. Her muffled voice didn't come from the stainless-steel head on the sidewalk. It emanated from somewhere inside her dress. Just above her collar, where her neck used to be, an outcropping of fine blond hair was tangled with bobby pins. "And I must say, hitting me wasn't very polite."

Belatedly, I realized the metal head had been a disguise. Just as satyrs covered their hooves with human shoes, this creature passed for mortal by pretending to have a human face. Its voice came from its gut area, which

meant…

My knees trembled.

“A blemmyae,” I said.

Nanette chuckled. Her bulging midsection writhed under the honeysuckle cloth. She ripped open her blouse—something a polite Midwesterner would never think of doing—and revealed her true face.

Where a woman’s brassiere would have been, two enormous bulging eyes blinked at me. From her sternum protruded a large shiny nose. Across her abdomen curled a hideous mouth—glistening orange lips, teeth like a spread of blank white playing cards.

“Yes, dear,” the face said. “And I’m arresting you in the name of the Triumvirate!”

Up and down Washington Street, pleasant-looking pedestrians turned and began marching in our direction.

2

Headless guys and gals
Not loving the Midwest vibe
Oh, look—a cheese ghost

GEE, APOLLO, you may be thinking, *why didn't you simply pull out your bow and shoot her? Or charm her with a song from your combat ukulele?*

True, I had both those items slung across my back along with my quiver. Sadly, even the best demigod weapons require something called *maintenance*. My children Kayla and Austin had explained this to me before I left Camp Half-Blood. I couldn't just pull my bow and quiver out of thin air as I used to when I was a god. I could no longer wish my ukulele into my hands and expect it to be perfectly in tune.

My weapons and my musical instrument were carefully wrapped in blankets. Otherwise flying through the wet winter skies would've warped the bow, ruined the arrows, and played Hades with the strings of my ukulele. To get them out now would require several minutes that I did not have.

Also, I doubted they would do me much good against blemmyae.

I hadn't dealt with their kind since the time of Julius Caesar, and I would've been happy to go another two thousand years without seeing one.

How could a god of poetry and music be effective against a species whose ears were wedged under their armpits? Nor did the blemmyae fear or respect archery. They were sturdy melee fighters with thick skin. They were even resistant to most forms of disease, which meant they never called on me for medical help nor feared my plague arrows. Worst of all, they were humorless and unimaginative. They had no interest in the future, so they saw no use for Oracles or prophecies.

In short, you could not *create* a race less sympathetic to an attractive, multitalented god like me. (And believe me, Ares had tried. Those eighteenth-century Hessian mercenaries he cooked up? Ugh. George Washington and I had

the *worst* time with them.)

"Leo," I said, "activate the dragon."

"I just put him into sleep cycle."

"Hurry!"

Leo fumbled with the suitcase's buttons. Nothing happened. "I told you, man. Even if Festus weren't malfunctioning, he's *really* hard to wake up once he's asleep."

Wonderful, I thought. Calypso hunched over her broken hand, muttering Minoan obscenities. Leo shivered in his underwear. And I…well, I was *Lester*. On top of all that, instead of facing our enemies with a large fire-breathing automaton, we would now have to face them with a barely portable piece of metal luggage.

I wheeled on the blemmyae. "BEGONE, foul Nanette!" I tried to muster my old *godly wrath* voice. "Lay hands upon my divine person again and you shall be DESTROYED!"

Back when I was a god, that threat would have been enough to make entire armies wet their camouflage pants. Nanette just blinked her cow-brown eyes.

"Don't fuss, now," she said. Her lips were grotesquely hypnotic, like watching a surgical incision being used as a puppet. "Besides, dearie, you're not a god anymore."

Why did people have to keep reminding me of that?

More locals converged on our position. Two police officers trotted down the steps of the statehouse. At the corner of Senate Avenue, a trio of sanitation workers abandoned their garbage truck and lumbered over wielding large metal trash cans. From the other direction, a half dozen men in business suits tromped across the capitol lawn.

Leo cursed. "Is everybody in this town a metalhead? And I don't mean the *good* kind of metalhead."

"Relax, sweetie," Nanette said. "Surrender and we won't have to hurt you much. That's the emperor's job!"

Despite her broken hand, Calypso apparently didn't feel like surrendering. With a defiant yell she charged Nanette again, this time launching a karate kick toward the blemmyae's giant nose.

"Don't!" I blurted out, too late.

As I mentioned, blemmyae are sturdy beings. They're difficult to hurt and even more difficult to kill. Calypso's foot connected with its target, and her ankle bent with a nasty *pop*. She collapsed, gurgling in pain.

"Cal!" Leo ran to her side. "Back off, chest-face!"

"Language, dear," Nanette chided. "Now I'm afraid I'll have to stomp on

you.”

She raised one patent leather pump, but Leo was faster. He summoned a globe of fire and threw it like a baseball, hitting Nanette right between her huge chest-level eyes. Flames washed over her, setting her eyebrows and flowery dress ablaze.

As Nanette screamed and stumbled, Leo yelled, “Apollo, help me!”

I realized I’d been standing there, frozen in shock—which would’ve been fine if I’d been watching the scene unfold from the safety of my throne on Mount Olympus. Alas, I was very much down here in the trenches with the lesser beings. I helped get Calypso to her feet (her one good foot, at least). We slung her arms over our shoulders (with lots of screaming from Calypso when I accidentally grabbed her broken hand) and began hobbling away.

Thirty feet across the lawn, Leo suddenly stopped. “I forgot Festus!”

“Leave him,” I snapped.

“What?”

“We can’t manage him *and* Calypso! We’ll come back later. The blemmyae might just ignore him.”

“But if they figure out how to open him,” Leo fretted, “if they hurt him—”

“MARRRGGGGH!” Behind us, Nanette ripped off the shreds of her burning dress. From the waist down, shaggy blond fur covered her body, not unlike a satyr. Her eyebrows smoldered, but otherwise her face looked unhurt. She spat ashes from her mouth and glared in our direction. “That was *not* nice! GET THEM!”

The businessmen were almost on top of us, eliminating any hope that we could make it back to Festus without getting caught.

We chose the only heroic option available: we ran.

I hadn’t felt so encumbered since my three-legged death race with Meg McCaffrey back at Camp Half-Blood. Calypso tried to help, kicking along like a pogo stick between Leo and me, but whenever she jostled her broken foot or hand, she yelped and sagged against us.

“S-sorry, guys,” she muttered, her face beaded with sweat. “Guess I’m not meant to be a melee fighter.”

“Neither am I,” I admitted. “Perhaps Leo can hold them off while—”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Leo grumbled. “I’m just a repair guy who can throw the occasional fireball. Our fighter is stuck back there in suitcase mode.”

“Hobble faster,” I suggested.

We reached the street alive only because the blemmyae moved so slowly. I suppose I would, too, if I were balancing a fake metal head on my, er, head, but even without their disguises, the blemmyae were not as swift as they were

strong. Their terrible depth perception made them walk with exaggerated caution, as if the ground were a multilayered hologram. If only we could out-hobble them…

"Good morning!" A police officer appeared on our right, his firearm drawn. "Halt or I will shoot! Thank you!"

Leo pulled a stoppered glass bottle from his tool belt. He tossed it at the officer's feet and green flames exploded around him. The officer dropped his gun. He began tearing off his burning uniform, revealing a chest-face with shaggy pectoral eyebrows and a belly beard in need of a shave.

"Phew," Leo said. "I was *hoping* he was a blemmyae. That was my only vial of Greek fire, guys. And I can't keep summoning fireballs unless I want to pass out, so—"

"We need to find cover," said Calypso.

Sensible advice, but *cover* did not seem to be an Indiana concept. The streets were wide and straight, the landscape flat, the crowds sparse, the sight lines endless.

We turned onto South Capitol. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the mob of smiling fake-headed locals gaining on us. A construction worker stopped to rip the fender off a Ford pickup, then rejoined the parade, his new chrome club slung over his shoulder.

Meanwhile, the regular mortals—at least, those who did not seem interested in killing us at the moment—went about their business, making phone calls, waiting at traffic lights, sipping coffee in nearby cafés, completely ignoring us. At one corner, sitting on a milk crate, a heavily blanketed homeless man asked me for change. I resisted the urge to tell him that change was coming up fast behind us, carrying assorted weapons.

My heart pounded. My legs shook. I hated having a mortal body. I experienced so many bothersome things, like fear, cold, nausea, and the impulse to whimper *Please don't kill me!* If only Calypso hadn't broken her ankle we might have moved faster, but we couldn't very well leave her behind. Not that I particularly liked Calypso, mind you, but I'd already convinced Leo to abandon his dragon. I didn't want to push my luck.

"There!" said the sorceress. She pointed with her chin to what looked like a service alley behind a hotel.

I shuddered, remembering my first day in New York as Lester Papadopoulos. "What if it's a dead end? The last time I found myself in a dead-end alley, things did not go well."

"Let's try," Leo said. "We might be able to hide in there, or…I dunno."

I dunno sounded like a sketchy plan B, but I had nothing better to offer.

Good news: the alley was not a dead end. I could clearly see an exit at the far end of the block. Bad news: the loading bays along the back of the hotel were locked, giving us nowhere to hide, and the opposite wall of the alley was lined with Dumpsters. Oh, Dumpsters! How I hated them!

Leo sighed. “I guess we could jump in—”

“No!” I snapped. “Never again!”

We struggled through the alley as fast as we could. I tried to calm my nerves by silently composing a sonnet about various ways a wrathful god could destroy Dumpsters. I became so engrossed I didn’t notice what was in front of us until Calypso gasped.

Leo halted. “What the—? *Hijo*.”

The apparition glowed with a faint ginger light. He wore a traditional chiton, sandals, and a sheathed sword, like a Greek warrior in the prime of life…except for the fact that he had been decapitated. Unlike the blemmyae, however, this person obviously had once been human. Ethereal blood trickled from his severed neck, splattering his luminous orange tunic.

“It’s a cheese-colored ghost,” Leo said.

The spirit raised one hand, beckoning us forward.

Not being born a mortal, I had no particular fear of the dead. You’ve seen one tormented soul, you’ve seen them all. But something about this ghost unsettled me. He stirred a distant memory, a feeling of guilt from thousands of years ago….

Behind us, the voices of the blemmyae grew louder. I heard them calling out “Morning!” and “Excuse me!” and “Lovely day!” to their fellow Indianans.

“What do we do?” Calypso asked.

“Follow the ghost,” I said.

“What?” Leo yelped.

“We follow the cheese-colored ghost. As you’re always saying: *Vaya con queso*.”

“That was a joke, *ese*.”

The orange spirit beckoned again, then floated toward the end of the alley.

Behind us, a man’s voice shouted, “There you are! Lovely weather, isn’t it?”

I turned in time to see a truck fender spiraling toward us.

“Down!” I tackled Calypso and Leo, provoking more screams of agony from the sorceress. The truck fender sailed over our heads and slammed into a Dumpster, sending up a festive explosion of garbage confetti.

We struggled to our feet. Calypso was shivering, no longer complaining about the pain. I was fairly sure she was going into shock.

Leo pulled a staple gun from his tool belt. “You guys go ahead. I’ll hold

them off as long as I can."

"What are you going to do?" I demanded. "Sort and collate them?"

"I'm going to throw things at them!" Leo snapped. "Unless you've got a better idea?"

"B-both of you stop," Calypso stammered. "We d-don't leave anyone behind. Now walk. Left, right, left, right."

We emerged from the alley into a wide-open circular plaza. Oh, why couldn't Indianans build a proper city with narrow, twisting streets, plenty of dark corners, and perhaps some conveniently placed bombproof bunkers?

In the middle of a ring-shaped drive stood a fountain surrounded by dormant flower beds. To the north rose the twin towers of another hotel. To the south loomed an older, grander building of redbrick and granite—perhaps a Victorian-era train station. On one side of the edifice, a clock tower soared roughly two hundred feet into the sky. Above the main entrance, under a marble archway, a colossal rose window gleamed in a frame of green copper, like a stained-glass version of the dartboard we used for our weekly game night on Mount Olympus.

That thought made me heartsick with nostalgia. I would've given anything to be back home for game night, even if it meant listening to Athena gloat about her Scrabble scores.

I scanned the plaza. Our ghostly guide seemed to have disappeared.

Why had he brought us here? Should we try the hotel? The train station?

Those questions became moot when the blemmyae surrounded us.

The mob burst out of the alley behind us. A police car swerved into the roundabout next to the train station. A bulldozer pulled into the hotel's driveway, the operator waving and calling out cheerfully, "Hello! I'm going to bulldoze you!"

All exits from the plaza were quickly blocked.

A line of sweat freeze-dried against my neck. An annoying whine filled my ears, which I realized was my own subvocalized whimpering of *Please don't kill me, please don't kill me.*

I won't die here, I promised myself. *I'm much too important to bite it in Indiana.*

But my trembling legs and chattering teeth seemed to disagree.

"Who has an idea?" I asked my compatriots. "Please, any brilliant idea."

Calypso looked like her most brilliant idea at the moment was trying not to throw up. Leo hefted his staple gun, which didn't seem to frighten the blemmyae.

From the midst of the mob, our old friend Nanette emerged, her chest-face grinning. Her patent leather pumps clashed terribly with her blond leg fur. "Gosh

darn it, dears, you've made me a bit miffed."

She grabbed the nearest street sign and single-handedly ripped it out of the ground. "Now, please hold still, won't you? I'm just going to smash your heads with this."

3

My last performance
Some old lady drops the mic
And kills everyone

I WAS ABOUT TO INITIATE Defense Plan Omega—falling to my knees and begging for mercy—when Leo saved me from that embarrassment.

"Bulldozer," he whispered.

"Is that a code word?" I asked.

"No. I'm going to sneak over to the bulldozer. You two distract the metalheads."

He shifted Calypso's weight to me.

"Are you crazy?" she hissed.

Leo shot her an urgent look, like *Trust me! Distract them!*

Then he took a careful step sideways.

"Oh!" Nanette beamed. "Are you volunteering to die first, short demigod? You did hit me with fire, so that makes sense."

Whatever Leo had in mind, I imagined his plan would fail if he began arguing with Nanette about his height. (Leo was a bit sensitive about being called *short*.) Fortunately, I have a natural talent for focusing everyone's attention on me.

"I volunteer for death!" I shouted.

The entire mob turned to look at me. I silently cursed my choice of words. I should have volunteered for something easier, like baking a pie or post-execution clean-up duty.

I often speak without the benefit of forethought. Usually it works out. Sometimes it leads to improvisational masterpieces, like the Renaissance or the Beat movement. I had to hope this would be one of those times.

"But first," I said, "hear my plea, O, merciful blemmyae!"

The policeman whom Leo had torched lowered his gun. A few green embers

of Greek fire still smoldered in his belly beard. “What do you mean, *hear my plea*?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s customary to hear the last words of a dying man…or god or demigod or…what would you consider yourself, Calypso? A Titan? A demi-Titan?”

Calypso cleared her throat with a noise that sounded suspiciously like *idiot*. “What Apollo is trying to say, O, merciful blemmyae, is that etiquette demands you grant us a few last words before you kill us. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to be impolite.”

The blemmyae looked aghast. They lost their pleasant smiles and shook their mechanical heads. Nanette shuffled forward, her hands raised in a placating manner. “No, indeed! We are *very* polite.”

“Extremely polite,” the policeman agreed.

“Thank you,” said Nanette.

“You’re welcome,” said the policeman.

“Listen, then!” I cried. “Friends, frenemies, blemmyae…open your armpits and hear my sad tale!”

Leo shuffled back another step, his hands in the pockets of his tool belt. Another fifty-seven, fifty-eight steps, and he would arrive at the bulldozer. Fantastic.

“I am Apollo!” I began. “Formerly a god! I fell from Olympus, cast down by Zeus, unfairly blamed for starting a war with the giants!”

“I’m going to be sick,” Calypso muttered. “Let me sit down.”

“You’re breaking my rhythm.”

“You’re breaking my eardrums. Let me sit!”

I eased Calypso onto the fountain’s retaining wall.

Nanette raised her street sign. “Is that it? May I kill you now?”

“No, no!” I said. “I am just, ah, letting Calypso sit so…so she can act as my chorus. A good Greek performance always needs a chorus.”

Calypso’s hand looked like a crushed eggplant. Her ankle had swollen around the top of her sneaker. I didn’t see how she could stay conscious, much less act as a chorus, but she took a shaky breath and nodded. “Ready.”

“Lo!” I said. “I arrived at Camp Half-Blood as Lester Papadopoulos!”

“A pathetic mortal!” Calypso chorused. “Most worthless of teens!”

I glared at her, but I didn’t dare stop my performance again. “I overcame many challenges with my companion, Meg McCaffrey!”

“He means his *master*!” Calypso added. “A twelve-year-old girl! Behold her pathetic slave, Lester, most worthless of teens!”

The policeman huffed impatiently. “We know all this. The emperor told us.”

“Shh,” said Nanette. “Be polite.”

I put my hand over my heart. “We secured the Grove of Dodona, an ancient Oracle, and thwarted the plans of Nero! But alas, Meg McCaffrey fled from me. Her evil stepfather had poisoned her mind!”

“Poison!” Calypso cried. “Like the breath of Lester Papadopoulos, most worthless of teens!”

I resisted the urge to push Calypso into the flower bed.

Meanwhile, Leo was making his way toward the bulldozer under the guise of an interpretive dance routine, spinning and gasping and pantomiming my words. He looked like a hallucinating ballerina in boxer shorts, but the blemmyae politely got out of his way.

“Lo!” I shouted. “From the Oracle of Dodona we received a prophecy—a limerick most terrible!”

“Terrible!” Calypso chorused. “Like the skills of Lester, most worthless of teens.”

“Vary your adjectives,” I grumbled, then continued for my audience: “We traveled west in search of another Oracle, along the way fighting many fearsome foes! The Cyclopes we brought low!”

Leo jumped onto the running board of the bulldozer. He raised his staple gun dramatically, then stapled the bulldozer operator twice in the pectorals—right where his actual eyes would be. That could *not* have felt good—even for a tough species such as the blemmyae. The operator screamed and grabbed his chest. Leo kicked him out of the driver’s seat.

The police officer yelled, “Hey!”

“Wait!” I implored them. “Our friend is only giving you a dramatic interpretation of how we beat the Cyclopes. That’s totally allowed while telling a story!”

The crowd shifted uncertainly.

“These are very long last words,” Nanette complained. “When will I get to smash your head in?”

“Soon,” I promised. “Now, as I was saying…we traveled west!”

I hauled Calypso to her feet again with much whimpering on her part (and a little bit on mine).

“What are you doing?” she muttered.

“Work with me,” I said. “Lo, frenemies! Behold how we traveled!”

The two of us staggered toward the bulldozer. Leo’s hands flew over the controls. The engine roared to life.

“This isn’t a story!” the police officer protested. “They’re getting away!”

“No, not at all!” I pushed Calypso onto the bulldozer and climbed up after

her. “You see, we traveled for many weeks like this….”

Leo started backing up. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* The bulldozer’s shovel began to rise.

“Imagine you are Camp Half-Blood,” I shouted to the crowd, “and we are traveling away from you.”

I realized my mistake. I had asked the blemmyae to imagine. They simply weren’t capable of that.

“Stop them!” The police officer raised his gun. His first shot ricocheted off the dozer’s metal scoop.

“Listen, my friends!” I implored. “Open your armpits!”

But we had exhausted their politeness. A trash can sailed over our heads. A businessman picked up a decorative stone urn from the corner of the fountain and tossed it in our direction, annihilating the hotel’s front window.

“Faster!” I told Leo.

“Trying, man,” he muttered. “This thing wasn’t built for speed.”

The blemmyae closed in.

“Look out!” Calypso yelled.

Leo swerved just in time to deflect a wrought-iron bench off our dozer blade. Unfortunately, that opened us up to a different attack. Nanette threw her street sign like a harpoon. The metal pole pierced the bulldozer’s chassis in a burst of steam and grease, and our getaway ride shuddered to a halt.

“Great,” Calypso said. “Now what?”

This would have been an excellent time for my godly strength to return. I could have waded into battle, tossing my enemies aside like rag dolls. Instead, my bones seemed to liquefy and pool in my shoes. My hands shook so badly I doubted I could unwrap my bow even if I tried. Oh, that my glorious life should end this way—crushed by polite headless people in the American Midwest!

Nanette leaped onto the hood of our bulldozer, giving me a ghastly view straight up her nostrils. Leo tried to blast her with flames, but this time Nanette was prepared. She opened her mouth and swallowed the fireball, showing no sign of distress except for a small burp.

“Don’t feel too bad, dears,” she told us. “You never would have gained access to the blue cave. The emperor has it too well guarded! A shame you have to die, though. The naming celebration is in three days, and you and the girl were supposed to be the main attractions in his slave procession!”

I was too terrified to fully process her words. *The girl.*…Did she mean Meg? Otherwise I heard only *blue—die—slave*, which at the moment seemed an accurate summary of my existence.

I knew it was hopeless, but I slipped my bow from my shoulder and began to

unwrap it. Suddenly an arrow sprouted between Nanette's eyes. She went cross-eyed trying to see it, then tumbled backward and crumbled to dust.

I stared at my blanketed weapon. I was a fast archer, yes. But I was fairly sure I hadn't fired that shot.

A shrill whistle caught my attention. In the middle of the plaza, standing atop the fountain, a woman crouched in faded jeans and a silvery winter coat. A white birch bow gleamed in her hand. On her back, a quiver bristled with arrows. My heart leaped, thinking that my sister Artemis had come to help me at last! But no…this woman was at least sixty years old, her gray hair tied back in a bun. Artemis would never appear in such a form.

For reasons she had never shared with me, Artemis had an aversion to looking any older than, say, twenty. I'd told her countless times that beauty was ageless. All the Olympian fashion magazines will tell you that four thousand is the new one thousand, but she simply wouldn't listen.

The gray-haired woman shouted, "Hit the pavement!"

All around the plaza, manhole-size circles appeared in the asphalt. Each one scissored open like the iris of a camera and turrets sprang up—mechanical crossbows swiveling and sweeping red targeting lasers in every direction.

The blemmyae didn't try to take cover. Perhaps they didn't understand. Perhaps they were waiting for the gray-haired woman to say *please*.

I, however, didn't need to be an archery god to know what would happen next. I tackled my friends for the second time that day. (Which, in retrospect, I have to admit felt a wee bit satisfying.) We tumbled off the bulldozer as the crossbows fired in a flurry of sharp hisses.

When I dared to raise my head, nothing was left of the blemmyae but piles of dust and clothing.

The gray-haired woman jumped from the top of the fountain. Given her age, I was afraid she might break her ankles, but she landed gracefully and strolled toward us, her bow at her side.

Wrinkles were etched across her face. The skin under her chin had begun to sag. Liver spots dotted the backs of her hands. Nevertheless, she held herself with the regal confidence of a woman who had nothing left to prove to anyone. Her eyes flashed like moonlight on water. Something about those eyes was very familiar to me.

She studied me for a count of five, then shook her head in amazement. "So it's true. You're Apollo."

Her tone was not the general *Oh, wow, Apollo!* sort of attitude I was used to. She said my name as if she knew me personally.

"H-have we met?"

“You don’t remember me,” she said. “No, I don’t suppose you would. Call me Emmie. And the ghost you saw—that was Agamethus. He led you to our doorstep.”

The name Agamethus definitely sounded familiar, but as usual, I couldn’t place it. My human brain just kept giving that annoying *memory full* message, asking me to delete a few centuries of experiences before I could continue.

Emmie glanced at Leo. “Why are you in your underwear?”

Leo sighed. “Been a long morning, *abuela*, but thanks for the assist. Those crossbow turrets are the bomb-diggity.”

“Thank you….I think.”

“Yeah, so maybe you could help us with Cal here?” Leo continued. “She’s not doing so well.”

Emmie crouched next to Calypso, whose complexion had turned the color of cement. The sorceress’s eyes were shut, her breathing ragged.

“She’s badly hurt.” Emmie frowned as she studied Calypso’s face. “You said her name was Cal?”

“Calypso,” Leo said.

“Ah.” Emmie’s worry lines deepened. “That explains it. She looks so much like Zoë.”

A knife twisted inside me. “Zoë Nightshade?”

In her feverish state, Calypso muttered something I couldn’t make out… perhaps the name *Nightshade*.

For centuries, Zoë had been Artemis’s lieutenant, the leader of her Hunters. She’d died in battle just a few years ago. I didn’t know if Calypso and Zoë had ever met, but they *were* half sisters—both daughters of the Titan Atlas. I’d never considered how much they looked alike.

I regarded Emmie. “If you knew Zoë, then you must be one of my sister’s Hunters. But you can’t be. You’re…”

I stopped myself before I could say *old and dying*. Hunters neither aged nor died, unless they were killed in combat. This woman was quite obviously mortal. I could sense her fading life energy…so depressingly like mine; not at all like an immortal being’s. It’s hard to explain how I could tell, but it was perfectly clear to me—like hearing the difference between a perfect fifth and a diminished fifth.

In the distance, emergency sirens wailed. I realized we were having this conversation in the middle of a small disaster zone. Mortals, or more blemmyae, would soon be arriving.

Emmie snapped her fingers. All around the plaza, the crossbow turrets retracted. The portals closed as if they’d never existed.

“We need to get off the street,” Emmie said. “Come, I’ll take you into the

Waystation.”

4

No building should be
A secret from Apollo
Or drop bricks on him

WE DIDN'T HAVE TO GO FAR.

Carrying Calypso between us, Leo and I followed Emmie to the big ornate building at the plaza's south end. As I suspected, it was a railroad depot at some point. Carved in granite under the rose window were the words UNION STATION.

Emmie ignored the main entrance. She veered right and stopped in front of a wall. She ran her finger between the bricks, tracing the shape of a doorway. Mortar cracked and dissolved. A newly cut door swung inward, revealing a narrow chute like a chimney with metal rungs leading up.

"Nice trick," Leo said, "but Calypso's not exactly in wall-climbing condition."

Emmie knit her brow. "You're right." She faced the doorway. "Waystation, can we have a ramp, please?"

The metal rungs vanished. With a soft rumble, the chute's interior wall slanted backward, the bricks rearranging themselves into a gentle upward slope.

"Whoa," said Leo. "Did you just talk to the building?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Emmie's mouth. "The Waystation is more than a building."

Suddenly, I did not fancy the look of that ramp. "This is a living structure? Like the Labyrinth? And you expect us to go *inside*?"

Emmie's glance was definitely the look of a Hunter. Only my sister's followers would dare to give me such a malodorous stink-eye. "The Waystation is no work of Daedalus, Lord Apollo. It's perfectly safe…as long as you remain our guests."

Her tone suggested that my welcome was probationary. Behind us, the emergency sirens grew louder. Calypso inhaled raggedly. I decided we didn't

have much choice. We followed Emmie into the building.

Lighting appeared along the walls—warm yellow candles flickering in bronze sconces. About twenty feet up the ramp, a door opened on our left. Inside, I glimpsed an infirmary that would've made my son Asclepius jealous: A fully stocked supply cabinet with medicine, surgical tools, and potion ingredients; a hospital bed with built-in monitors, GCI interface, and levitating bariatric slings. Racks of healing herbs dried against the wall next to the portable MRI machine. And in the back corner, a glassed-in habitat seethed with poisonous snakes.

"Oh, my," I said. "Your med bay is cutting-edge."

"Yes," Emmie agreed. "And Waystation is telling me I should treat your friend immediately."

Leo poked his head into the infirmary. "You mean this room just *appeared* here?"

"No," Emmie said. "Well, yes. It's always here, but…it's easier to find when we need it."

Leo nodded thoughtfully. "You think the Waystation could organize my sock drawer?"

A brick fell from the ceiling and clunked at Leo's feet.

"That's a *no*," Emmie interpreted. "Now, if I can have your friend, please."

"Uh…" Leo pointed to the glass habitat. "You got snakes in there. Just saying."

"I'll take good care of Calypso," Emmie promised.

She took Calypso from us, lifting the sorceress in her arms with no apparent difficulty. "You two go ahead. You'll find Jo at the top of the ramp."

"Jo?" I asked.

"You can't miss her," Emmie replied. "She'll explain the Waystation better than I could."

She carried the sorceress into the infirmary. The door shut behind her.

Leo frowned at me. "Snakes?"

"Oh, yes," I assured him. "There's a reason a snake on a rod symbolizes medicine. Venom was one of the earliest cures."

"Huh." Leo glanced at his feet. "You think I can keep this brick, at least?"

The corridor rumbled.

"I would leave it there," I suggested.

"Yeah, think I'll leave it there."

After a few more feet, another door opened on our right.

Inside, sunlight filtered through pink lace curtains onto the hardwood floor of a child's room. A cozy bed was piled with fluffy comforters, pillows, and stuffed

animals. The eggshell-colored walls had been used as a canvas for crayon art—stick-figure people, trees, houses, frolicking animals that might have been dogs or horses or llamas. On the left-hand wall, opposite the bed, a crayon sun smiled down on a field of happy crayon flowers. In the center, a stick-figure girl stood between two larger parental stick figures—all three of them holding hands.

The wall art reminded me of Rachel Elizabeth Dare's cavern of prophecy at Camp Half-Blood. My Delphic Oracle had delighted in painting her cave with things she'd seen in her visions…before her oracular power ceased to work, that is. (Totally not my fault. You can blame that overgrown rat snake, Python.)

Most of the drawings in this bedroom seemed typical for a child of about seven or eight. But in the farthest corner of the back wall, the young artist had decided to inflict a nightmarish plague upon her crayon world. A scribbly black storm was brewing. Frowning stick figures threatened the llamas with triangular knives. Dark curlicues blotted out a primary-colored rainbow. Scratched over the field of green grass was a huge inky sphere like a black pond…or the entrance of a cave.

Leo stepped back. "I dunno, man. Don't think we should go in."

I wondered why the Waystation had decided to show us this room. Who lived here? Or more accurately…who *had* lived here? Despite the cheerful pink curtains and the pile of stuffed animals on the carefully made bed, the bedroom felt abandoned, preserved like a museum exhibit.

"Let's keep going," I agreed.

Finally, at the top of the ramp, we emerged into a cathedral-like hall. Overhead curved a barreled ceiling of wood carvings, with glowing stained-glass panels in the center creating green and gold geometric designs. At the far end of the room, the rose window I'd seen outside cast dartboard-line shadows across the painted cement floor. To our left and right, there were raised walkways with wrought-iron railings, and elegant Victorian lampposts lined the walls. Behind the railings, rows of doorways led into other rooms. Half a dozen ladders stretched up to the ornate molding at the base of the ceiling, where the ledges were stuffed with hay-like roosts for very large chickens. The whole place had a faint animal scent…though it reminded me more of a dog kennel than a henhouse.

In one corner of the main room gleamed a chef's kitchen big enough to host several celebrity cook-offs at once. Sets of sofas and comfy chairs were clustered here and there. At the center of the hall stood a massive dining table of rough-hewn redwood with seating for twenty.

Under the rose window, the contents of several different workshops seemed to have been disgorged at random: table saws, drills, lathes, kilns, forges, anvils,

3-D printers, sewing machines, cauldrons, and several other industrial appliances I couldn't name. (Don't judge me. I'm not Hephaestus.)

Hunched over a welding station, throwing sparks from her torch as she worked on a sheet of metal, was a muscular woman in a metal visor, leather apron, and gloves.

I'm not sure how she noticed us. Perhaps the Waystation chucked a brick at her back to get her attention. Whatever the case, she looked in our direction, shut off her torch, then lifted her visor.

"I'll be hexed!" She barked out a laugh. "Is that *Apollo*?"

She tugged off her safety gear and lumbered over. Like Emmie, the woman was in her sixties, but whereas Emmie had the physique of a former gymnast, this woman was built for brawling. Her broad shoulders and dark, well-sculpted arms stretched against the confines of a faded pink polo shirt. Wrenches and screwdrivers sagged from the pockets of her denim overalls. Against the umber skin of her scalp, her buzz-cut gray hair shimmered like frost.

She thrust out her hand. "You probably don't remember me, Lord Apollo. I'm Jo. Or Josie. Or Josephine. Whichever."

With each version of her name, she squeezed my hand tighter. I would not have challenged her to an arm-wrestling contest (though with her meaty fingers I doubt she could play guitar as well as I do, so *ha*). Her square-jawed face would've been quite intimidating except for her cheerful, twinkling eyes. Her mouth twitched as if she were exerting a great effort not to bust out laughing.

"Yes," I squeaked, extracting my hand. "I mean, no. I'm afraid I don't remember. May I introduce Leo?"

"Leo!" She crushed his hand with enthusiasm. "I'm Jo."

All these people whose names ended in *o—Jo, Leo, Calypso, Apollo—* suddenly made me feel like my brand was being diluted. I thanked the gods we were not in Ohio and our dragon was not named Festo.

"I think I'll call you Josephine," I decided. "It's a lovely name."

Josephine shrugged. "Fine by me. Where's your friend Calypso?"

"Wait," Leo said. "How'd you know about Calypso?"

Josephine tapped her left temple. "Waystation tells me stuff."

"Oooh." Leo's eyes widened. "That's cool."

I wasn't so sure. Normally, when someone said that a building was talking to them, I got away from them as quickly as possible. Sadly, I believed Josephine. I also had the feeling we would be needing her hospitality.

"Calypso's in the infirmary," I offered. "Broke her hand. And foot."

"Ah." The sparkle dimmed in Josephine's eyes. "Yeah, you met the neighbors."

“You mean the blemmyae.” I imagined the *neighbors* stopping by to borrow a socket wrench, or take an order for Girl Scout cookies, or murder someone. “Do you often have problems with them?”

“Didn’t use to.” Josephine sighed. “By themselves, blemmyae are pretty harmless, as long as you’re polite to them. They don’t have enough imagination to organize an assault. But since last year—”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Indianapolis has a new emperor?”

A ripple of anger washed across Josephine’s face, giving me a glimpse of what it would be like to get on her bad side. (Hint: It involved pain.)

“Best we don’t talk about the emperor until Emmie and your friend join us,” she said. “Without Emmie around to keep me calm…I get worked up.”

I nodded. Not getting Josephine worked up sounded like an excellent plan. “But we’re safe here?”

Leo held out his palm as if checking for brick raindrops. “That was my question too. I mean…we kind of led an angry mob to your doorstep.”

Josephine waved aside our concern. “Don’t worry. The emperor’s forces have been searching for us for months. The Waystation isn’t easy to find unless we invite you in.”

“Huh.” Leo tapped the floor with his foot. “So, did you design this place? ’Cause it’s pretty awesome.”

Josephine chuckled. “I wish. A demigod architect with *way* more talent than me did that. Built the Waystation back in the 1880s, early days of the transcontinental railroad. It was meant as a refuge for demigods, satyrs, Hunters—pretty much anyone who needed one here in the middle of the country. Emmie and I are just lucky enough to be the present caretakers.”

“I’ve never even heard of this place,” I said grumpily.

“We…ah, keep a low profile. Lady Artemis’s orders. Need-to-know basis.”

As a god, I was the very definition of *need-to-know*, but it was typical of Artemis to keep something like this to herself. She was *such* a doomsday prepper, always hiding things from the other gods, like stashes of supplies, emergency bunkers, and small nation-states. “I assume this place isn’t a train station anymore. What do mortals think it is?”

Josephine grinned. “Waystation, transparent floor, please.”

Beneath our feet, the stained cement disappeared. I leaped back as if standing on a hot skillet, but the floor was not actually gone. It had simply turned see-through. Around us, the rugs, furniture, and workshop equipment seemed to hover two stories over the actual ground floor of the hall, where twenty or thirty banquet tables had been set up for some sort of event.

“Our living space occupies the top of the grand hall,” Josephine said. “That

area below us was once the main concourse for the station. Now the mortals rent it out for weddings and parties and whatnot. If they look up—"

"Adaptive camouflage," Leo guessed. "They see an image of the ceiling, but they don't see you. Nice!"

Josephine nodded, obviously pleased. "Most of the time, it's quiet around here, though it gets noisy on weekends. If I have to hear 'Thinking Out Loud' from one more wedding cover band, I may have to drop an anvil."

She pointed to the floor, which immediately turned back to opaque cement. "Now if you guys don't mind, I need to finish a section of a project I'm working on. Don't want the metal plates to cool without proper welding. After that—"

"You're a child of Hephaestus, aren't you?" Leo said.

"Hecate, actually."

Leo blinked. "No way! But that sweet workshop area you got—"

"Magical construction is my specialty," said Josephine. "My dad, my *mortal* dad, was a mechanic."

"Nice!" Leo said. "My mom was a mechanic! Hey, if I could use your machine tools, I left this dragon at the statehouse and—"

"Ahem," I interrupted. As much as I wanted Festus back, I did not think a nearly indestructible, impossible-to-open suitcase was in any immediate danger. I was also afraid that if Leo and Josephine started chatting, they would soon be bonding over the wonders of serrated flange bolts and I would die of boredom. "Josephine, you were about to say *after that*…?"

"Right," Josephine agreed. "Give me a few minutes. Then I can show you to some guest rooms and, uh, maybe get Leo here some clothing. These days, we've got plenty of vacancies, unfortunately."

I wondered why that was unfortunate. Then I remembered the little girl's empty room we'd passed. Something told me it might be best not to ask about that.

"We appreciate your help," I told Josephine. "But I still don't understand. You say Artemis knows about this place. You and Emmie are—or were—Hunters?"

Josephine's neck muscles tightened against the collar of her pink polo. "We were."

I frowned. I'd always thought of my sister's followers as a sort of all-maiden mafia. Once you were in, you never left—unless you left in a lovely silver coffin. "But—"

"Long story," Josephine cut me off. "I probably should let Hemithea tell it."

"Hemithea?" The name hit me like one of the Waystation's bricks. My face felt as if it were slipping down to the center of my chest, blemmyae-style.

Suddenly I realized why Emmie had looked familiar. No wonder I'd felt such a sense of unease. "Emmie. Short for Hemithea. *The* Hemithea?"

Josephine glanced from side to side. "You really didn't know?" She jabbed a finger over her shoulder. "So…I'm gonna get back to that welding now. There's food and drinks in the kitchen. Make yourselves at home."

She beat a hasty retreat back to her workshop.

"Dang," Leo muttered. "She's *awesome*."

"Humph."

Leo arched his eyebrows. "Were you and Hemithea an item back in the day or something? When you heard her name, you looked like somebody kicked you in the crotch."

"Leo Valdez, in four thousand years, no one has *ever* dared to kick me in the crotch. If you mean I looked slightly shocked, that's because I knew Hemithea when she was a young princess in ancient Greece. We were never an *item*. However, I'm the one who made her immortal."

Leo's eyes drifted toward the workshop, where Josephine had begun to weld again. "I thought all Hunters became immortal once they took the pledge to Artemis."

"You misunderstand," I said. "I made Hemithea immortal *before* she became a Hunter. In fact, I turned her into a god."

5

Tell you a story?
Or I could just, like, pass out
And twitch on the couch

THIS WAS LEO'S CUE to sit at my feet and listen, enraptured, as I told him the story.

Instead, he waved vaguely toward the workshop. "Yeah, okay. I'm gonna check out the forges."

He left me by myself.

Demigods today. I blame social media for their short attention spans. When you can't even take the time to listen to a god hold forth, that's just sad.

Unfortunately, the story insisted on being remembered. Voices, faces, and emotions from three thousand years ago flooded my mind, taking control of my senses with such force that I almost crumpled.

Over the past few weeks, during our travels west, these waking visions had been happening with alarming frequency. Perhaps they were the result of my faulty human neurons trying to process godly memories. Perhaps Zeus was punishing me with vivid flashbacks of my most spectacular failures. Or perhaps my time as a mortal was simply driving me crazy.

Whatever the case, I barely managed to reach the nearest couch before collapsing.

I was dimly aware of Leo and Josephine standing at the welding station, Josephine in her welder's gear and Leo in his boxer shorts, chatting about whatever project Josephine was working on. They didn't seem to notice my distress.

Then the memories swallowed me.

I found myself hovering above the ancient Mediterranean. Sparkling blue water stretched to the horizon. A warm, salty wind buoyed me up. Directly below, the white cliffs of Naxos rose from the surf like the baleen ridge of a

whale's mouth.

From a town about three hundred yards inland, two teenage girls ran for their lives—making their way toward the edge of the cliff with an armed mob close behind them. The girls' white dresses billowed, and their long dark hair whipped in the wind. Despite their bare feet, the rocky terrain did not slow them down. Bronzed and lithe, they were clearly used to racing outdoors, but they were running toward a dead end.

At the head of the mob, a portly man in red robes screamed and waved the handle of a broken ceramic jar. A gold crown glinted on his brow. Streaks of wine had crusted in his gray beard.

His name came to me: Staphylus, king of Naxos. A demigod son of Dionysus, Staphylus had inherited all of his father's worst traits and none of his party-dude chill. Now in a drunken rage, he was yelling something about his daughters breaking his finest amphora of wine, and so, naturally, they had to die.

"I'll kill you both!" he screamed. "I will tear you apart!"

I mean…if the girls had broken a Stradivarius violin or gold-plated harmonica, I might have understood his rage. But a jar of wine?

The girls ran on, crying to the gods for help.

Normally, this sort of thing would not have been my problem. People cried to the gods for help all the time. They almost never offered anything interesting in return. I probably would have just hovered over the scene, thinking *Oh, dear, what a shame. Ouch. That must have hurt!* and then gone about my normal business.

This particular day, however, I was not flying over Naxos merely by chance. I was on my way to see the drop-dead gorgeous Rhoeo—the king's eldest daughter—with whom I happened to be in love.

Neither of the girls below was Rhoeo. I recognized them as her younger sisters Parthenos and Hemithea. Nevertheless, I doubted Rhoeo would appreciate it if I failed to help her sisters on my way to our big date. *Hey, babe. I just saw your sisters get chased off a cliff and plummet to their deaths. You want to catch a movie or something?*

But if I helped her sisters, against the wishes of their homicidal father and in front of a crowd of witnesses—that would require divine intervention. There would be forms to fill out, and the Three Fates would demand everything in triplicate.

While I was deliberating, Parthenos and Hemithea charged toward the precipice. They must have realized they had nowhere to go, but they didn't even slow down.

"Help us, Apollo!" Hemithea cried. "Our fate rests with you!"

Then, holding hands, the two sisters leaped into the void.

Such a show of faith—it took my breath away!

I couldn't very well let them go *SPLAT* after they'd entrusted me with their lives. Now Hermes? Sure, he might have let them die. He would've found that hilarious. Hermes is a twisted little scamp. But Apollo? No. I had to honor such courage and panache!

Parthenos and Hemithea never hit the surface of the water. I stretched out my hands and zapped the girls with a mighty zap—imparting some of my own divine life force into them. Oh, how you should envy those girls! Shimmering and disappearing with a golden flash, filled with tingly warmth and newfound power, they floated upward in a cloud of Tinker Bell–quality glitter.

It is no small thing to make someone a god. The general rule is that power trickles down, so any god can theoretically make a new god of lesser power than him or herself. But this requires sacrificing some of one's own divinity, a small amount of what makes you *you*—so gods don't grant such a favor often. When we do, we usually create only the most *minor* of gods, as I did with Parthenos and Hemithea: just the basic immortality package with few bells and whistles. (Although I threw in the extended warranty, because I'm a nice guy.)

Beaming with gratitude, Parthenos and Hemithea flew up to meet me.

"Thank you, Lord Apollo!" Parthenos said. "Did Artemis send you?"

My smile faltered. "Artemis?"

"She must have!" Hemithea said. "As we fell, I prayed, 'Help us, Artemis!'"

"No," I said. "You cried out, 'Help us, Apollo!'"

The girls looked at each other.

"Er…no, my lord," said Hemithea.

I was *sure* she had said my name. In retrospect, however, I wondered if I had been assuming rather than listening. The three of us stared at one another. That moment when you turn two girls immortal and then find out they didn't call on you to do so…Awkward.

"Well, it doesn't matter!" Hemithea said cheerfully. "We owe you a great debt, and now we are free to follow our hearts' desires!"

I was hoping she would say *To serve Apollo for all eternity and bring him a warm lemon-scented towel before every meal!*

Instead, Parthenos said, "Yes, we will join the Hunters of Artemis! Thank you, Apollo!"

They used their new powers to vaporize, leaving me alone with an angry mob of Naxoans screaming and shaking their fists at the sea.

The worst thing? The girls' sister Rhoeo broke up with me like a week later.

Over the centuries, I saw Hemithea and Parthenos from time to time in

Artemis's retinue. Mostly we avoided each other. Making them minor gods was one of those benevolent mistakes I didn't want to write any songs about.

My vision changed, shifting as subtly as the light through the Waystation's rose window.

I found myself in a vast apartment of gold and white marble. Beyond the glass walls and the wraparound terrace, afternoon shadows flooded the skyscraper canyons of Manhattan.

I had been here before. No matter where my visions took me, I always seemed to end up back in this nightmarish scene.

Reclining on a gilded chaise lounge, the emperor Nero looked horrifically resplendent in a purple suit, a blue pastel shirt, and pointy alligator-leather shoes. On his sizable paunch he balanced a plate of strawberries, popping them one at a time into his mouth with his little finger raised to show off the hundred-karat diamond on his pinky ring.

"Meg…" He shook his head sadly. "Dear Meg. You should be more excited! This is your chance for redemption, my dear. You won't disappoint me, will you?"

His voice was soft and gentle, like a heavy snowfall—the sort that builds up and brings down power lines, collapses roofs, kills entire families.

Standing before the emperor, Meg McCaffrey looked like a wilting plant. Her dark pageboy hair hung listlessly around her face. She slumped in her green T-shirt dress, her knees bent in her yellow leggings, one red high-top kicking listlessly at the marble floor. Her face was lowered, but I could see that her cat-eye glasses had been broken since our last encounter. Scotch tape covered the rhinestone tips at either joint.

Under the weight of Nero's gaze, she seemed so small and vulnerable. I wanted to rush to her side. I wanted to smash that plate of strawberries into Nero's chinless, neck-bearded excuse for a face. Alas, I could only watch, knowing that this scene had already happened. I had seen it unfold several times in my visions over the last few weeks.

Meg didn't speak, but Nero nodded as if she'd answered his question.

"Go west," he told her. "Capture Apollo before he can find the next Oracle. If you cannot bring him to me alive, kill him."

He crooked his diamond-weighted pinky finger. From the line of imperial bodyguards behind him, one stepped forward. Like all Germani, the man was enormous. His muscular arms bulged against his leather cuirass. His brown hair grew wild and long. His rugged face would have been scary even without the serpent tattoo that coiled around his neck and up his right cheek.

"This is Vortigern," said Nero. "He will keep you…safe."

The emperor tasted the word *safe* as if it had many possible meanings, none of them good. “You will also travel with another member of the Imperial Household just in case, ah, *difficulties* arise.”

Nero curled his pinky again. From the shadows near the stairs appeared a teenage boy who looked very much like the sort of boy who enjoyed appearing from shadows. His dark hair hung over his eyes. He wore baggy black pants, a black muscle shirt (despite his lack of muscles), and enough gold jewelry around his neck to make him a proper festival idol. At his belt hung three sheathed daggers, two on the right and one on the left. The predatory gleam in his eyes made me suspect those blades were not just for show.

In all, the boy reminded me somewhat of Nico di Angelo, the son of Hades, if Nico were slightly older, more vicious, and had been raised by jackals.

“Ah, good, Marcus,” Nero said. “Show Meg your destination, will you?”

Marcus smiled thinly. He held up his palm, and a glowing image appeared above his fingertips: a bird’s-eye view of a city I now recognized as Indianapolis.

Nero popped another strawberry in his mouth. He chewed it slowly, letting the juice dribble down his weak chin. I decided that if I ever returned to Camp Half-Blood, I would have to convince Chiron to change their cash crop to blueberries.

“Meg, my dear,” Nero said, “I *want* you to succeed. *Please* don’t fail. If the Beast becomes cross with you again…” He shrugged helplessly. His voice ached with sincerity and concern. “I just don’t know how I could protect you. Find Apollo. Subject him to your will. I know you can do this. And, my dear, *do* be careful in the court of our friend the New Hercules. He is not as much a gentleman as I. Don’t get caught up in his obsession with destroying the House of Nets. That’s a mere sideshow. Succeed quickly and come back to me.” Nero spread his arms. “Then we can be one happy family again.”

The boy Marcus opened his mouth, perhaps to make a snide comment, but when he spoke it was Leo Valdez’s voice, shattering the vision. “Apollo!”

I gasped. I was back in the Waystation, sprawled across the couch. Standing over me, frowning with concern, were our hosts, Josephine and Emmie, along with Leo and Calypso.

“I—I had a dream.” I pointed weakly at Emmie. “And you were there. And…the rest of you, not so much, but—”

“A dream?” Leo shook his head. He was now dressed in a pair of grimy overalls. “Man, your eyes were wide open. You were lying there all twitching and stuff. I’ve seen you have some visions before, but not like that.”

I realized my arms were shaking. I grabbed my right hand with my left, but

that only made it worse. “I—I heard some new details, or things I didn’t remember from before. About Meg. And the emperors. And—”

Josephine patted my head as if I were a cocker spaniel. “You sure you’re okay there, Sunny? You don’t look so hot.”

There was a time when I would have deep-fried anyone who called me Sunny. After I took over the reins of the sun chariot from the old Titan god Helios, Ares had called me Sunny for centuries. It was one of the few jokes he understood (at least one of the few *clean* jokes).

“I’m fine,” I snapped. “Wh-what’s going on? Calypso, you’re already healed?”

“You’ve been out for hours, actually.” She raised her recently broken hand, which now looked as good as new, and wriggled her fingers. “But yes. Emmie is a healer to rival Apollo.”

“You had to say that,” I grumbled. “You mean I’ve been lying here for hours and nobody noticed?”

Leo shrugged. “We were kinda busy talking shop. We probably wouldn’t have noticed you as soon as we did except, uh, somebody here wants to talk to you.”

“Mmm,” Calypso agreed, a worried look in her eyes. “He’s been very insistent about it.”

She pointed toward the rose window.

At first, I thought I was seeing orange spots. Then I realized an apparition was floating toward me. Our friend Agamethus, the headless ghost, had returned.

6

Oh, Magic 8 Ball
Epic fail at prophecies
Leo's ear's on fire

THE GHOST DRIFTED toward us. His mood was difficult to discern, since he had no face, but he seemed agitated. He pointed at me, then made a series of hand gestures I didn't understand—shaking his fists, lacing his fingers, cupping one hand as if holding a sphere. He stopped on the opposite side of the coffee table.

"'Sup, Cheese?" Leo asked.

Josephine snorted. *"Cheese?"*

"Yeah, he's orange," Leo said. "Why is that? Also, why is he headless?"

"Leo," Calypso chided. "Don't be rude."

"Hey, it's a fair question."

Emmie studied the ghost's hand gestures. "I've never seen him this worked up. He glows orange because…Well, actually I have no idea. As for why he is headless—"

"His brother cut off his head," I supplied. The memory surfaced from the dark stew of my mortal brain, though I did not recall the details. "Agamethus was the brother of Trophonius, the spirit of the Dark Oracle. He…" There was something else, something that filled me with guilt, but I couldn't remember.

The others stared at me.

"His brother did *what*?" Calypso asked.

"How did you know that?" Emmie demanded.

I had no answer. I was not sure myself where the information had come from. But the ghost pointed at me as if to say, *This dude knows what's up,* or possibly, more disturbingly, *It's your fault.* Then he again made the gesture of holding a sphere.

"He wants the Magic 8 Ball," Josephine interpreted. "I'll be right back."

She jogged over to her workshop.

"The Magic 8 Ball?" Leo grinned at Emmie. The name tag on his borrowed overalls read GEORGIE. "She's kidding, right?"

"She's dead serious," Emmie said. "Er…so to speak. We might as well sit."

Calypso and Emmie took the armchairs. Leo hopped onto the couch next to me, bouncing up and down with such enthusiasm I had an annoying pang of nostalgia for Meg McCaffrey. As we waited for Josephine, I tried to dredge my memory for more specifics about this ghost Agamethus. Why would his brother Trophonius have decapitated him, and why did *I* feel so guilty about it? But I had no success—just a vague sense of unease, and the feeling that despite his lack of eyes, Agamethus was glaring at me.

Finally, Josie trotted back over. In one hand, she gripped a black plastic sphere the size of a honeydew melon. On one side, painted in the middle of a white circle, was the number 8.

"I love those things!" Leo said. "Haven't seen one in years."

I scowled at the sphere, wondering if it was some sort of bomb. That would explain Leo's excitement. "What does it do?"

"Are you kidding?" asked Leo. "It's a Magic 8 Ball, man. You ask it questions about the future."

"Impossible," I said. "I am the god of prophecy. I know *every* form of divination, and I have never heard of a Magic 8 Ball."

Calypso leaned forward. "I'm not familiar with this form of sorcery, either. How does it work?"

Josephine beamed. "Well, it's supposed to be just a toy. You shake it, turn it over, and an answer floats up in this little plastic window on the bottom. I made some modifications. Sometimes the Magic 8 Ball picks up on Agamethus's thoughts and conveys them in writing."

"Sometimes?" Leo asked.

Josephine shrugged. "Like, thirty percent of the time. Best I could manage."

I still had no idea what she was talking about. The Magic 8 Ball struck me as a very shady form of divination—more like a Hermes game of chance than an Oracle worthy of me.

"Wouldn't it be faster if Agamethus simply wrote down what he wanted to say?" I asked.

Emmie shot me a warning look. "Agamethus is illiterate. He's a little sensitive about that."

The ghost turned toward me. His aura darkened to the color of a blood orange.

"Ah…" I said. "And those hand gestures he was making?"

“It’s no form of sign language that we can figure out,” Jo said. “We’ve been trying for seven years, ever since Agamethus joined us. The Magic 8 Ball’s the best form of communication we’ve got. Here, buddy.”

She tossed him the magical sphere. Since Agamethus was ethereal, I expected the ball to sail right through him and shatter on the floor. Instead, Agamethus caught it easily.

“Okay!” Josephine said. “So, Agamethus, what do you want to tell us?”

The ghost shook the Magic 8 Ball vigorously and then threw it to me. I was not prepared for the sphere to be full of liquid, which, as any water-bottle-flipper can tell you, makes an object much more difficult to control. It hit my chest and dropped into my lap. I barely caught it before it wobbled off the couch.

“Master of dexterity,” Calypso muttered. “Turn it over. Weren’t you listening?”

“Oh, be quiet.” I wished Calypso could only communicate 30 percent of the time. I rotated the ball bottom-up.

As Josephine had described, a layer of clear plastic was set in the base of the sphere, providing a window to the liquid inside. A large white multisided die floated into view. (I knew this thing smacked of Hermes’s wretched gambling games!) One side of it pressed against the window, revealing a sentence written in block letters.

“‘Apollo must bring her home,’” I read aloud.

I looked up. Emmie’s and Josephine’s faces had become twin masks of shock. Calypso and Leo exchanged a wary glance.

Leo started to say, “Uh, what—?”

Simultaneously, Emmie and Josephine unleashed a torrent of questions: “Is she alive? Is she safe? Where is she? Tell me!”

Emmie shot to her feet. She began to pace, sobbing in great dry heaves, while Josephine advanced on me, her fists clenched, her gaze as sharp as the pointed flame of her welding torch.

“I don’t know!” I tossed Josephine the ball as if it were a hot baklava. “Don’t kill me!”

She caught the Magic 8 Ball, then seemed to check herself. She took a heavy breath. “Sorry, Apollo. Sorry. I…” She turned to Agamethus. “Here. Answer us. Tell us.”

She threw him the ball.

Agamethus seemed to regard the magical sphere with his nonexistent eyes. His shoulders slumped as if he did not relish his job. He shook the ball once again and tossed it back to me.

“Why *me*?” I protested.

“Read it!” Emmie snapped.

I turned it over. A new message appeared out of the liquid.

“‘Reply hazy,’” I read aloud. “‘Try again later.’”

Emmie wailed in despair. She sank into her seat and buried her face in her hands. Josephine rushed to her side.

Leo frowned at the ghost. “Yo, Cheese, just shake it again, man.”

“It’s no use,” Josephine said. “When the Magic 8 Ball says *try again later*, that’s exactly what it means. We’ll have to wait.”

She sat on the arm of Emmie’s chair and cradled Emmie’s head against her. “It’s all right,” Josie murmured. “We’ll find her. We’ll get her back.”

Hesitantly, Calypso stretched out her palm, as if she weren’t sure how to help. “I’m so sorry. Who—who is missing?”

With a quivering lip, Josephine pointed to Leo.

Leo blinked. “Uh, I’m still here—”

“Not you,” Josephine said. “The name tag. Those overalls—they were hers.”

Leo patted the stitched name on his chest. “Georgie?”

Emmie nodded, her eyes puffy and red. “Georgina. Our adopted daughter.”

I was glad I was sitting down. Suddenly, so many things made sense that they overwhelmed me like another vision: the two aging Hunters who were not Hunters, the child’s empty bedroom, the crayon drawings done by a little girl. Josephine had mentioned that Agamethus arrived in their lives approximately seven years ago.

“You two left the Hunters,” I said. “For each other.”

Josephine gazed into the distance, as if the building’s walls were as transparent as the Magic 8 Ball’s base. “We didn’t exactly plan it. We left in… what, 1986?”

“Eighty-seven,” Emmie said. “We’ve been aging together ever since. Very happily.” She wiped away a tear, not looking terribly happy at the moment.

Calypso flexed her recently broken hand. “I don’t know much about Lady Artemis, or her rules for followers—”

“That’s fine,” Leo interrupted.

Calypso glared at him. “But don’t they forswear the company of *men*? If you two fell in love—”

“No,” I said bitterly. “All romance is off-limits. My sister is quite unreasonable in that regard. The mission of the Hunters is to live without romantic distractions of any kind.”

Thinking about my sister and her anti-romantic ideas irritated me. How could two siblings be *so* different? But I was also irritated with Hemithea. She had not only given up being a Hunter; in doing so she had also given up the divinity I

had granted her.

Just like a human! We give you immortality and godly power, then you trade it in for love and a loft in downtown Indianapolis. The nerve!

Emmie wouldn't meet my eyes.

She sighed wistfully. "We delighted in being Hunters, both of us. They were our family. But…" She shrugged.

"We loved each other more," Josephine supplied.

I got the feeling they finished each other's sentences a lot, their thoughts were in such comfortable harmony. That did not help my irritation levels.

"You must have parted with Artemis on good terms," I said. "She let you live."

Josephine nodded. "The Lady's Hunters often stop here at the Waystation… though we have not seen Artemis herself in decades. Then, seven years ago, we were blessed with Georgina. She…she was brought to our door by Agamethus."

The orange ghost bowed.

"He brought her from where?" I wondered.

Emmie spread her hands. "We've never been able to get that information from him. It's the one question the Magic 8 Ball never answers."

Leo must have been thinking deeply—a tuft of fire broke out at the top of his left ear. "Hold up. Agamethus isn't your kid's dad, is he? Also…you're telling me I'm wearing the overalls of a seven-year-old girl, and they *fit*?"

That got a broken laugh from Josephine. "I suppose they do. And no, Leo, Agamethus is not Georgina's father. Our ghostly friend has been dead since ancient times. Like Apollo said, he was the brother of Trophonius, the spirit of the Oracle. Agamethus appeared here with baby Georgie. Then he led us to the Oracle. That was the first we knew of its existence."

"So you have its location," I said.

"Of course," Emmie murmured. "For all the good it does us."

Too many questions crowded in my head. I wanted to divide myself into a dozen different manifestations so I could pursue every answer at once, but alas, mortals don't split easily. "But the girl and the Oracle must be connected somehow."

Emmie closed her eyes. I could tell she was trying hard to suppress a sob. "We didn't realize how closely they were connected. Not until Georgie was taken from us."

"The emperor," I guessed.

Josephine nodded.

I hadn't even met this second member of the Triumvirate yet, and I already hated him. I had lost Meg McCaffrey to Nero. I did not like the idea of another

young girl being taken by another evil emperor.

"In my vision," I recalled, "I heard Nero call this emperor *the New Hercules*. Who is he? What did he do with Georgina?"

Emmie rose unsteadily to her feet. "I—I need to do something productive with my hands. It's the only way I've stayed sane the past two weeks. Why don't you all help us make lunch? Then we'll talk about the monster who controls our city."

7

I chopped those onions
With my own ex-godly hands
You'd better eat them

BEING PRODUCTIVE.

Ugh.

It's such a human concept. It implies you have limited time (LOL) and have to work hard to make something happen (double LOL). I mean, perhaps if you were laboring away for years writing an opera about the glories of Apollo, I could understand the appeal of being productive. But how can you get a sense of satisfaction and serenity from preparing food? That I did *not* understand.

Even at Camp Half-Blood I wasn't asked to make my own meals. True, the hot dogs were questionable, and I never found out what sort of bugs were in bug juice, but at least I'd been served by a cadre of beautiful nymphs.

Now I was compelled to wash lettuce, dice tomatoes, and chop onions.

"Where does this food *come* from?" I asked, blinking tears from my eyes.

I'm no Demeter, but even I could tell this produce was fresh from the earth, probably because of the amount of dirt I had to wash off.

The thought of Demeter made me think of Meg, which might've caused me to weep even if I hadn't already been afflicted by onion fumes.

Calypso dumped a basket of muddy carrots in front of me. "Emmie's got a garden on the roof. Greenhouses. Year-round growing. You should see the herbs—basil, thyme, rosemary. It's *amazing*."

Emmie smiled. "Thank you, dear. You definitely know your gardening."

I sighed. Now *those* two were bonding. Soon I would be stuck between Emmie and Calypso discussing kale-growing techniques and Leo and Josephine waxing poetic about carburetors. I couldn't win.

Speak of the daimon: Leo burst through the door next to the pantry, holding aloft a wheel of cheese like a victor's laurel crown.

“BEHOLD THE CHEDDAR!” he announced. “ALL HAIL THE CHEESE CONQUERORS!”

Josephine, chuckling good-naturedly, lumbered in behind him with a metal pail. “The cows seemed to like Leo.”

“Hey, *abuelita*,” Leo said. “All da cows love Leo.” He grinned at me. “And these cows are red, man. Like…*bright red*.”

That definitely made me want to weep. Red cows were my favorite. For centuries I had a herd of sacred scarlet cattle before cow-collecting went out of fashion.

Josephine must have seen the miserable look on my face.

“We just use their milk,” she said hastily. “We don’t butcher them.”

“I should hope not!” I cried. “Killing red cattle would be sacrilege!”

Josephine didn’t look properly terrified by the idea. “Yeah, but mostly it’s because Emmie made me give up meat twenty years ago.”

“It’s much better for you,” Emmie chided. “You’re not immortal anymore, and you need to take care of yourself.”

“But cheeseburgers,” Jo muttered.

Leo plunked the cheese wheel in front of me. “Cut me a wedge of this, my good man. Chop-chop!”

I scowled at him. “Don’t test me, Valdez. When I am a god again, I will make a constellation out of you. I will call it the Small Exploding Latino.”

“I like it!” He patted my shoulder, causing my knife to jiggle.

Did no one fear the wrath of the gods anymore?

While Emmie baked loaves of bread—which I must admit smelled incredible—I tossed a salad with carrots, cucumbers, mushrooms, tomatoes, and all manner of roof-grown plant material. Calypso used fresh lemons and cane sugar to make lemonade, while humming tracks from Beyoncé’s album of the same name. (During our travels west, I had taken it upon myself to catch Calypso up on the last three millennia of popular music.)

Leo cut the cheese. (You can interpret that any way you want.) The cheddar wheel turned out to be bright red all the way through and quite tasty. Josephine made dessert, which she said was her specialty. Today this meant fresh berries and homemade sponge cake in sweet red cream, with a meringue topping lightly toasted with a welding torch.

As for the ghost Agamethus, he hovered in one corner of the kitchen, holding his Magic 8 Ball dejectedly as if it were a third-place prize from a three-person competition.

Finally, we sat down to lunch. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. It had been quite a while since breakfast, and Festus’s in-flight meal service left much

to be desired.

I shoveled my food in while Leo and Calypso told our hosts about our travels west. Between bites of fresh bread with bright red butter, I added commentary as needed, since of course I had the superior storytelling skills.

We explained how my ancient foe Python had retaken the original site of Delphi, cutting off access to the most powerful Oracle. We explained how the Triumvirate had sabotaged all forms of communication used by demigods—Iris-messages, magical scrolls, ventriloquist puppets, even the arcane magic of e-mail. With the help of Python, the three evil emperors now intended to control or destroy *all* the Oracles from ancient times, thus putting the very future of the world in a stranglehold.

"We freed the Grove of Dodona," I summed up. "But that Oracle simply sent us here to secure the next source of prophecy: the Cave of Trophonius."

Calypso pointed to my quiver, which lay against the nearest sofa. "Apollo, show them your talking arrow."

Emmie's eyes gleamed with the keen interest of an archer. "Talking arrow?"

I shuddered. The arrow I had retrieved from the whispering trees of Dodona had so far done me little good. Only I could hear its voice, and whenever I asked its advice, it spouted nonsense in Elizabethan English, which infected my speech patterns and left me talking like a bad Shakespearean actor for hours. This amused Calypso to no end.

"I will not show them my talking arrow," I said. "I will, however, share the limerick."

"No!" said Calypso and Leo in unison. They dropped their forks and covered their ears.

I recited:

"There once was a god named Apollo
Who plunged in a cave blue and hollow
Upon a three-seater
The bronze fire-eater
Was forced death and madness to swallow."

Around the table, an uncomfortable silence fell.

Josephine glowered. "Never before has any voice dared to utter a limerick in this house, Apollo."

"And let us hope no one will ever do so again," I agreed. "But such was the prophecy of Dodona that brought us here."

Emmie's expression tightened, removing any lingering doubts that this was the same Hemithea I had immortalized so many centuries ago. I recognized the intensity in her eyes—the same determination that had sent her over a cliff, trusting her fate to the gods.

" 'A cave blue and hollow'…" she said. "That's the Oracle of Trophonius, all right. It's located in the Bluespring Caverns, about eighty miles south of town."

Leo grinned as he chewed, his mouth an avalanche of earth-toned food particles. "Easiest quest ever, then. We get Festus back, then we look up this place on Google Maps and fly down there."

"Doubtful," Josephine said. "The emperor has the surrounding countryside heavily guarded. You couldn't fly a dragon anywhere near Bluespring without getting shot out of the sky. Even if you could, the cave entrances are all *way* too small for a dragon to plunge into."

Leo pouted. "But the limerick—"

"May be deceptive," I said. "It is, after all, a limerick."

Calypso sat forward. She had wrapped a napkin around her formerly broken hand—perhaps because it still ached, perhaps because she was nervous. It reminded me of torch wadding—not a happy association after my last encounter with the mad emperor Nero.

"What about the last line?" she asked. "Apollo will be *forced death and madness to swallow*."

Josephine stared at her empty plate. Emmie gave her hand a quick squeeze.

"The Oracle of Trophonius is dangerous," Emmie said. "Even when we had free access to it, before the emperor moved in, we would only consult the spirit in extreme emergencies." She turned to me. "You must remember. You were the god of prophecy."

Despite the excellent lemonade, my throat felt parched. I didn't like being reminded of what I used to be. I also didn't like the gigantic holes in my memory, filled with nothing but vague dread.

"I—I remember the cave was dangerous, yes," I said. "I don't recall why."

"You don't recall." Emmie's voice took on a dangerous edge.

"I normally concentrated on the godly side of things," I said. "The quality of the sacrifices. What sort of incense the petitioners burned. How pleasing the hymns of praise were. I never asked what kind of trials the petitioners went through."

"You never asked."

I didn't like Emmie echoing my words. I had a feeling she would make an even worse Greek chorus than Calypso.

"I did some reading at Camp Half-Blood," I said defensively. "There wasn't

much about Trophonius. Chiron couldn't help, either. He'd completely forgotten about the Oracle. Supposedly, Trophonius's prophecies were dark and scary. Sometimes they drove people insane. Perhaps his cave was a sort of haunted house? With, uh, dangling skeletons, priestesses jumping out and saying *BOO*?"

Emmie's sour expression told me that my guess was off the mark.

"I also read something about petitioners drinking from two special springs," I persisted. "I thought *swallowing death and madness* might be a symbolic reference to that. You know, poetic license."

"No," Josephine muttered. "It's not poetic license. That cave literally drove our daughter mad."

A cold draft swept across my neck, as if the Waystation itself had let out a forlorn sigh. I thought about the apocalypse I'd seen crayoned on the wall of the child's now-abandoned bedroom.

"What happened?" I asked, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know—especially if it might be a portent of what I would soon face.

Emmie tore a piece of bread crust. She let the pieces fall. "Once the emperor came to Indianapolis…this *New Hercules*…"

Calypso started to ask a question, but Emmie raised a hand. "Please, dear, don't ask me to name him. Not here. Not now. As I'm sure you know, many gods and monsters hear you when you speak their names. *He* is worse than most."

A pang of sympathy pulled at the corner of Calypso's mouth. "Please, go on."

"At first," Emmie said, "we didn't understand what was happening. Our friends and companions began to disappear." She gestured around her at the vast living area. "We used to have a dozen or so living here at any given time. Now… we're all that's left."

Josephine leaned back in her chair. In the light of the rose window, her hair gleamed the same steel gray as the wrenches in her coverall pockets. "The emperor was looking for us. He knew about the Waystation. He wanted to destroy us. But like I said, this isn't an easy place to find unless we invite you in. So, instead, his forces waited until our people were outside. They took our friends a few at a time."

"Took them?" I asked. "As in *alive*?"

"Oh, yeah." Josephine's grim tone made it sound as if death would've been preferable. "The emperor loves prisoners. He captured our guests, our griffins."

A berry slipped out of Leo's fingers. "Griffins? Uh…Hazel and Frank told me about griffins. They fought some in Alaska. Said they were like rabid hyenas with wings."

Josephine smirked. “The small ones, the wild ones, can be, yeah. But we raise the best here. At least…we did. Our last mating pair disappeared about a month ago. Heloise and Abelard. We let them out to hunt—they have to do that to stay healthy. They never returned. For Georgina, that was the final insult.”

A bad feeling began to nag at me. Something beyond the obvious *we’re talking about creepy things that might get me killed*. The griffin nests in the niches above us. A distant memory about my sister’s followers. A comment Nero had made in my vision: that the New Hercules was obsessed with destroying the House of Nets, as if that were another name for the Waystation…I felt like someone’s shadow was falling over the dining table, someone I should know, perhaps someone I should be running away from.

Calypso unwrapped the napkin from her hand. “Your daughter,” she asked. “What happened to her?”

Neither Josephine nor Emmie responded. Agamethus bowed slightly, his bloody tunic glowing in various shades of nacho topping.

“It’s obvious,” I said into the silence. “The girl went to the Cave of Trophonius.”

Emmie looked past me to Agamethus, her eyes as sharp as arrow points. “Georgina got it into her head that the only way to save the Waystation and find the captives was to consult the Oracle. She’d always been drawn to the place. She didn’t fear it the way most people did. One night she slipped away. *Agamethus* helped her. We don’t know exactly how they got there—”

The ghost shook his Magic 8 Ball. He tossed it to Emmie, who frowned at the answer on the bottom.

“ ‘It was ordained,’” she read. “I don’t know what you mean, you old, dead fool, but she was just a *child*. Without the throne, you *knew* what would happen to her!”

“The throne?” Calypso asked.

Another memory bobbed to the surface of my eight-ball brain.

“Oh, gods,” I said. “The throne.”

Before I could say more, the entire hall shuddered. Plates and cups rattled on the dining table. Agamethus vanished in a flash of nacho orange. At the top of the barreled ceiling, the green and brown stained-glass panels darkened as if a cloud had blacked out the sun.

Josephine rose. “Waystation, what’s happening on the roof?”

As far as I could tell, the building didn’t respond. No bricks shot out of the wall. No doors banged open and shut in Morse code.

Emmie set the Magic 8 Ball on the table. “The rest of you, stay here. Jo and I will check it out.”

Calypso frowned. “But—”

“That’s an order,” Emmie said. “I’m not losing any more guests.”

“It can’t be Com—” Josephine stopped herself. “It can’t be him. Maybe Heloise and Abelard are back?”

“Maybe.” Emmie didn’t sound convinced. “But just in case…”

The two women moved quickly to a metal supply cabinet in the kitchen. Emmie grabbed her bow and quiver. Josephine pulled out an old-fashioned machine gun with a circular drum magazine between the two handles.

Leo nearly choked on his dessert. “Is that a *tommy gun*?”

Josephine patted the weapon affectionately. “This is Little Bertha. A reminder of my sordid past life. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. You all sit tight.”

With that comforting advice, our heavily armed hosts marched off to check the roof.

8

Lovebirds arguing
Trouble in Elysium?
I'll just scrub these plates

THE ORDER TO *sit tight* seemed clear enough to me.

Leo and Calypso, however, decided that the least we could do was clean up the lunch dishes. (See my previous comment re: the dumbness of productivity.) I scrubbed. Calypso rinsed. Leo dried, which wasn't even work for him, since all he had to do was heat his hands a little.

"So," Calypso said, "what's this throne Emmie mentioned?"

I scowled at my foamy stack of bread pans. "The Throne of Memory. It's a chair carved by the goddess Mnemosyne herself."

Leo leered at me over the top of a steaming salad plate. "You forgot the Throne of Memory? Isn't that a mortal sin or something?"

"The only mortal sin," I said, "would be failing to incinerate you as soon as I become a god again."

"You could try," Leo said. "But then how would you learn those secret scales on the Valdezinator?"

I accidentally sprayed myself in the face. "What secret scales?"

"Both of you, stop," Calypso ordered. "Apollo, why is this Throne of Memory important?"

I wiped the water off my face. Talking about the Throne of Memory had jogged loose a few more pieces of information from my mind, but I didn't like what I'd remembered.

"Before a petitioner went into the Cave of Trophonius," I said, "he or she was supposed to drink from two magical springs: Forgetfulness and Memory."

Leo picked up another plate. Steam curled from the porcelain. "Wouldn't the two springs, like, cancel each other out?"

I shook my head. "Assuming the experience didn't kill you, it would prepare

your mind for the Oracle. You would then descend into the cave and experience…untold horrors."

"Such as?" Calypso asked.

"I just said they were *untold*. I do know that Trophonius would fill your mind with bits of nightmarish verse that, if assembled properly, became a prophecy. Once you stumbled out of the cave—assuming you lived and weren't driven permanently insane—the priests would sit you down on the Throne of Memory. The verses would come spilling out of your mouth. A priest would write them down, and *voilà*! There's your prophecy. With any luck, your mind would return to normal."

Leo whistled. "That is one *messed-up* Oracle. I like the singing trees better."

I suppressed a shudder. Leo hadn't been with me in the Grove of Dodona. He didn't appreciate just how terrible those clashing voices were. But he had a point. There was a reason few people remembered the Cave of Trophonius. It wasn't a place that got rave write-ups in the yearly "Hot Oracles to Visit Now" articles.

Calypso took a bread pan from me and began to wash it. She seemed to know what she was doing, though her hands were so lovely I couldn't imagine she often did her own dishes. I would have to ask her which moisturizer she used.

"What if the petitioner couldn't use the throne?" she asked.

Leo snickered. *"Use the throne."*

Calypso glared at him.

"Sorry." Leo tried to look serious, which for him was always a losing battle.

"If the petitioner couldn't use the throne," I said, "there would be no way to extract the bits of verse from his or her mind. The petitioner would be stuck with those horrors from the cave—forever."

Calypso rinsed the pan. "Georgina…that poor child. What do you think happened to her?"

I didn't want to think about *that*. The possibilities made my skin crawl. "Somehow she must have made it into the cave. She survived the Oracle. She made it back here, but…not in good shape." I recalled the frowny-faced knife-wielding stick figures on her bedroom wall. "My guess is that the emperor subsequently seized control of the Throne of Memory. Without that, Georgina would never be able to recover fully. Perhaps she left again and went looking for it…and was captured."

Leo muttered a curse in Spanish. "I keep thinking about my little bro Harley back at camp. If somebody tried to hurt him…" He shook his head. "Who is this emperor and how soon can we stomp him?"

I scrubbed the last of the pans. At least this was one epic quest I had successfully completed. I stared at the bubbles fizzing on my hands.

"I have a pretty good idea who the emperor is," I admitted. "Josephine started to say his name. But Emmie is right—it's best not to speak it aloud. *The New Hercules*…" I swallowed. In my stomach, salad and bread seemed to be holding a mud-wrestling contest. "He was not a nice person."

In fact, if I had the right emperor, this quest could be personally awkward. I hoped I was wrong. Perhaps I could stay at the Waystation and direct operations while Calypso and Leo did the actual fighting. That seemed only fair, since I'd had to scrub the dishes.

Leo put away the dinner plates. His eyes scanned side to side as if reading invisible equations.

"This project Josephine is working on," he said. "She's building some kind of tracking device. I didn't ask, but…she must be trying to find Georgina."

"Of course." Calypso's voice took on a sharper edge. "Can you imagine losing your child?"

Leo's ears reddened. "Yeah. But I was thinking, if we can get back to Festus, I could run some numbers, maybe reprogram his Archimedes sphere—"

Calypso threw in the towel, quite literally. It landed in the sink with a damp *flop*. "Leo, you can't reduce everything to a program."

He blinked. "I'm not. I just—"

"You're trying to fix it," Calypso said. "As if every problem is a machine. Jo and Emmie are in serious pain. Emmie told me they're thinking about abandoning the Waystation, giving themselves up to the emperor if it'll save their daughter. They don't need gadgets or jokes or fixes. Try *listening*."

Leo held out his hands. For once, he didn't seem to know what to do with them. "Look, babe—"

"Don't *babe* me," she snapped. "Don't—"

"APOLLO?" Josephine's voice boomed from the main hall. She didn't sound panicked exactly, but definitely tense—somewhat like the atmosphere in the kitchen.

I stepped away from the happy couple. Calypso's outburst had taken me by surprise, but as I thought about it, I recalled half a dozen other spats between her and Leo as we had traveled west. I simply hadn't thought much about them because…well, the fights weren't about me. Also, compared to godly lovers' quarrels, Leo and Calypso's were nothing.

I pointed over my shoulder. "I think I'll just, uh…"

I left the kitchen.

In the middle of the main hall, Emmie and Josephine stood with their

weapons at their sides. I couldn't quite read their expressions—expectant, on edge, the way Zeus's cupbearer Ganymede looked whenever he gave Zeus a new wine to try.

"Apollo." Emmie pointed over my head, where griffin nests lined the edge of the ceiling. "You have a visitor."

In order to see who Emmie was pointing at, I had to step forward onto the rug and turn around. In retrospect, I shouldn't have done that. As soon as I placed my foot on the rug, I thought, Wait, was this rug here before?

Which was followed closely by the thought: Why does this rug look like a tightly woven net?

Followed by: This is a net.

Followed by: YIKES!

The net enmeshed me and rocketed me into the air. I regained the power of flight. For a microsecond, I imagined I was being recalled to Olympus—ascending in glory to sit at the right hand of my father. (Well, three thrones down on Zeus's right, anyway.)

Then gravity took hold. I bounced like a yo-yo. One moment I was eye-level with Leo and Calypso, who were gaping at me from the kitchen entrance. The next moment I was even with the griffins' nests, staring into the face of a goddess I knew all too well.

You're probably thinking: *It was Artemis. This net trap was just a little sibling prank. Surely no loving sister would let her brother suffer so much for so long. She has finally come to rescue our hero, Apollo!*

No. It was not Artemis.

The young woman sat on the molding ledge, playfully swinging her legs. I recognized her elaborately laced sandals, her dress made from layers of mesh in forest-colored camouflage. Her braided auburn hair made a ponytail so long it wrapped around her neck like a scarf or a noose. Her fierce dark eyes reminded me of a panther watching its prey from the shadows of the underbrush—a panther with a twisted sense of humor.

A goddess, yes. But not the one I had hoped for.

"You," I snarled. It was difficult to sound menacing while bobbing up and down in a net.

"Hello, Apollo." Britomartis, the goddess of nets, smiled coyly. "I hear you're human now. This is going to be fun."

9

Of course it's a trap
With her, it always is one
Trappy McTrapface

BRITOMARTIS JUMPED from the ledge and landed in a kneeling position, her skirts spread around her in a pool of netting.

(She loves those dramatic entrances. She is *such* an anime-character wannabe.)

The goddess rose. She pulled out her hunting knife. "Apollo, if you value your anatomy, hold still."

I had no time to protest that I couldn't exactly hold still while suspended in a swaying net. She slashed her knife across my groin. The net broke and spilled me to the floor, thankfully with my anatomy intact.

My landing was not graceful. Fortunately, Leo and Calypso rushed to my aid. They each took an arm and helped me up. I was reassured to see that despite their recent spat, they could still unite on important matters like my welfare.

Leo reached into his tool belt, perhaps searching for a weapon. Instead he produced a tin of breath mints. I doubted that would do us much good.

"Who is this lady?" he asked me.

"Britomartis," I said. "The Lady of Nets."

Leo looked dubious. "Does that include basketball and the Internet?"

"Just hunting and fishing nets," I said. "She is one of my sister's minions."

"Minion?" Britomartis wrinkled her nose. "I am no minion."

Behind us, Josephine coughed. "Uh, sorry, Apollo. The Lady insisted on getting your attention this way."

The goddess's face brightened. "Well, I had to see if he would step in my trap. And he did. As usual. Hemithea, Josephine…give us the room, please."

Our hosts glanced at each other, probably wondering which of them would have to clean up the bodies after Britomartis was through with us. Then they

retreated through a doorway at the back of the hall.

Calypso sized up the net goddess. “Britomartis, eh? Never heard of you. You must be minor.”

Britomartis smiled thinly. “Oh, but I’ve heard of *you*, Calypso. Exiled to Ogygia after the Titan War. Waiting for whatever *man* might wash up on your shores to break your heart and leave you alone again. That must have gotten terribly old.” She turned to Leo. “This is your rescuer, eh? A bit short and scruffy for a knight in shining armor.”

“Hey, lady.” Leo shook his tin of breath mints. “I’ve blown up way more powerful goddesses than you before.”

“And he’s not my *rescuer*,” Calypso added.

“Yeah!” Leo frowned. “Wait, I kind of was, actually.”

“Nor is he a knight,” Calypso mused. “Although he is short and scruffy.”

A puff of smoke rose from Leo’s collar. “Anyway”—he faced Britomartis—“where do you get off ordering Jo and Emmie around like this is your house?”

I grabbed his breath mints before Britomartis could transform them into nitroglycerin. “Leo, I’m afraid this *is* her house.”

The goddess gave me that coquettish smile I hated so much—the one that made me feel as if hot nectar were bubbling in my stomach. “Why, Apollo, you made a correct deduction! How did you manage it?”

Whenever I was faced with Britomartis, I made myself just a bit taller than she. Alas, now I could not change my height at will. The best I could do was push up on the balls of my feet.

“Nero called this place the House of Nets,” I said. “I should’ve realized the Waystation was your idea. Whenever my sister wanted to design some elaborate contraption—something twisted and dangerous—she always turned to you.”

The goddess curtsied, swirling her net skirts. “You flatter me. Now come, my friends! Let’s sit and talk!”

She gestured to the nearest cluster of sofas.

Leo approached the furniture cautiously. For all his faults, he was not stupid. Calypso was about to sink into an armchair when Leo caught her wrist. “Hold up.”

From his tool belt he pulled a folding yardstick. He extended it and poked the chair’s seat cushion. A bear trap snapped shut, ripping through stuffing and fabric like an upholstery sharknado.

Calypso glared at Britomartis. “Are you *kidding*?”

“Oops!” Britomartis said gleefully.

Leo pointed to one of the sofas, though I could see nothing amiss. “There’s a trip wire along the back of those cushions, too. Does that…Does that trigger a

Bouncing Betty?"

Britomartis laughed. "You're good! Yes, indeed. That is a modified pressure-activated S-mine."

"Lady, if that went off, it would bounce three feet in the air, explode, and kill all of us with shrapnel."

"Exactly!" Britomartis said with delight. "Leo Valdez, you'll do nicely."

Leo glowered at her. He pulled some wire cutters from his belt, walked over to the sofa, and deactivated the mine.

I took a breath for the first time in several seconds. "I think I'll sit…over here." I pointed to the opposite sofa. "Is that safe?"

Leo grunted. "Yeah. Looks okay."

Once we were all comfortably settled in, with no one mangled or killed, Britomartis lounged across the formerly bear-trapped armchair and smiled. "Well, isn't this nice?"

"No," the three of us chorused.

Britomartis toyed with her braid, possibly looking for trip wires she might have forgotten about. "You asked me why I sent Jo and Emmie away. I love them dearly, but I don't think they'd appreciate the quest I'm about to give you."

"Quest?" Calypso arched her eyebrows. "I'm pretty sure I'm an older divinity than you, Bouncing Betty. What right do you have to give *me* a quest?"

Britomartis flashed that flirty smile. "Aren't you cute. Hon, I was around when the ancient Greeks were living in caves. I started out as a *Cretan* goddess. When the rest of my pantheon died out, Artemis befriended me. I joined her Hunters and here I am, thousands of years later, still weaving my nets and setting my traps."

"Yes," I grumbled. "Here you are."

The goddess spread her arms. Lead weights and fishing hooks dangled from her embroidered sleeves. "Dear Apollo, you really do make a darling Lester Papadopoulos. Come here."

"Don't tease me," I begged.

"I'm not! Now that you're a harmless mortal, I've decided to finally give you that kiss."

I knew she was lying. I knew that her dress would entangle me and hurt me. I recognized the malicious gleam in her rust-red eyes.

She had led me astray so many times over the millennia.

I flirted shamelessly with *all* my sister's followers. But Britomartis was the only one who ever flirted back, even though she was just as much an avowed maiden as any Hunter. She *delighted* in tormenting me. And how many times had she pranked me by offering to set me up with other people? Gah! Artemis

had never been known for her sense of humor, but her sidekick Britomartis more than made up for that. She was insufferable. Beautiful, but insufferable.

I admit I was tempted. Weak mortal flesh! Even weaker than divine flesh!

I shook my head. “You’re tricking me. I won’t do it.”

She looked offended. “When have I ever tricked you?”

“Thebes!” I cried. “You promised to meet me in the forest for a romantic picnic. Instead I was trampled by a giant wild boar!”

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“What about the Ingrid Bergman incident?”

“Oh, she really did want to meet you. How was I to know someone had dug a Burmese tiger pit outside her trailer?”

“And the date with Rock Hudson?”

Britomartis shrugged. “Well, I never actually *said* he was waiting for you in the middle of that minefield. I just let you assume. You have to admit, though, the two of you would’ve made a cute couple.”

I whimpered and pulled my curly mortal hair. Britomartis knew me too well. I was a fool for being in a cute couple.

Leo looked back and forth between us as if he’d stumbled across a heated game of Greek fire toss. (It was big in Byzantium. Don’t ask.)

“Rock Hudson,” he said. “In a minefield.”

Britomartis beamed. “Apollo was *so* adorable, skipping through the daisies until he exploded.”

“In case you’ve forgotten,” I muttered, “I am no longer immortal. So, please, no Burmese tiger pits.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it!” said the goddess. “No, this quest isn’t designed to kill you. It *might* kill you, but it’s not designed to. I just want my griffins back.”

Calypso frowned. “*Your* griffins?”

“Yes,” the goddess said. “They are winged lion-eagle hybrids with—”

“I know what a griffin is,” Calypso said. “I know Jo and Emmie breed them here. But why are they *yours*?”

I coughed. “Calypso, griffins are the goddess’s sacred animals. She is their mother.”

Britomartis rolled her eyes. “Only in a figurative sense. I don’t sit on their eggs and hatch them.”

“You convinced me to do that once,” I recalled. “For a kiss I never got.”

She laughed. “Yes, I’d forgotten about that! At any rate, the local emperor has captured my babies Heloise and Abelard. In fact, he’s been capturing mythical animals from all over the Midwest to use in his diabolic games. They must be freed.”

Leo studied the disassembled land mine pieces in his lap. “The kid. Georgina. That’s why you don’t want Jo and Emmie here. You’re putting your griffins’ safety ahead of their daughter’s.”

Britomartis shrugged. “Jo and Emmie’s priorities have been compromised. They would not be able to hear this, but the griffins must come first. I have my reasons. Being a goddess, my needs take precedence.”

Calypso sniffed with disgust. “You’re as greedy and territorial as your *babies*.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” said the goddess. “I promised Artemis I would try to help you three, but don’t test my patience. You’d look wonderful as a northern crested newt.”

A mixture of hope and sadness welled in my chest. Artemis, my loving sister, had not abandoned me after all. Zeus may have forbidden the other Olympians from helping me, but at least Artemis had sent her lieutenant Britomartis. Of course, Britomartis’s idea of “help” involved testing us with land mines and bear traps, but at this point I would take what I could get.

“And if we find these griffins?” I asked.

“Then I’ll tell you how to infiltrate the emperor’s lair,” Britomartis promised. “Being the goddess of traps, I know all about secret entrances!”

I stared at her. “How is that a fair trade?”

“Because, you adorable Lester, you *need* to infiltrate the palace to rescue Georgina and the other prisoners. Without them, the Waystation is doomed, and so are your chances of stopping the Triumvirate. Also, the palace is where you’ll find the Throne of Memory. If you can’t retrieve that, your trip to the Cave of Trophonius will kill you. You’ll never save the other Oracles. You’ll never get back to Mount Olympus.”

I turned to Leo. “I’m new to this heroic-quest business. Shouldn’t there be a reward at the end? Not just more deadly quests?”

“Nope,” Leo said. “This is pretty standard.”

Oh, the injustice! A minor goddess forcing *me*, one of the twelve Olympians, to retrieve animals for her! I silently vowed that if I ever regained my godhood, I would never again send a poor mortal on a quest. Unless it was really important. And unless I was sure the mortal could handle it. And unless I was pressed for time…or I just really didn’t feel like doing it myself. I would be *much* kinder and more generous than this net goddess was being to me.

“What would you have us do?” I asked Britomartis. “Wouldn’t these griffins be held at the emperor’s palace? Couldn’t we do some one-stop shopping?”

“Oh, no,” Britomartis said. “The really important animals, the rare and valuable ones…the emperor keeps those in a special facility with the proper

resources to care for them. The Indianapolis Zoo."

I shuddered. I find zoos to be depressing places, full of sad caged animals, screaming children, and bad food.

"The griffins will be well guarded," I guessed.

"Absolutely!" Britomartis sounded a bit too excited about the prospect. "So please try to release the griffins *before* you get injured or killed. Also, you must hurry—"

"Here comes the time limit." Leo looked at me knowingly. "There's always a time limit."

"In three days," Britomartis continued, "the emperor plans to use all the animals and prisoners in one massive celebration."

"A naming ceremony," I recalled. "Nanette, the blemmyae who almost killed us, she mentioned something about that."

"Indeed." Britomartis grimaced. "This emperor…he *loves* naming things after himself. At the ceremony, he plans to rechristen Indianapolis."

That in itself did not strike me as a tragedy. Indianapolis was a rather difficult name to love. However, if this emperor was who I thought he was, his idea of a celebration involved slaughtering people and animals by the thousands. He really was not the sort of person you wanted organizing your child's birthday party.

"The blemmyae mentioned something else," I said. "The emperor wanted to sacrifice two special prisoners. Me and *the girl*."

Calypso clasped her hands like the jaws of the bear trap. "Georgina."

"Exactly!" Britomartis again sounded a bit too cheerful. "The girl is safe enough for now. Imprisoned and insane, yes, but alive. You concentrate on freeing my griffins. Go to the zoo at first light. The emperor's guards will be ending their night shift then. They'll be tired and inattentive."

I gazed at the land mine pieces in Leo's hands. Death by explosion was starting to sound like a kinder fate than Britomartis's quest.

"At least I won't be alone," I muttered.

"Actually," said the goddess, "Leo Valdez must remain here."

Leo flinched. "Say what?"

"You've proven yourself skilled with traps!" the goddess explained. "Emmie and Josephine need your help. The Waystation has defied discovery by the emperor so far, but that won't last much longer. He can't tolerate any opposition. He *will* find this sanctuary. And he means to destroy it. You, Leo Valdez, can help shore up the defenses."

"But—"

"Cheer up!" Britomartis faced Calypso. "*You* can go with Apollo, my dear.

Two former immortals on a quest for me! Yes, I like that idea a lot."

Calypso paled. "But…No. I don't—"

"She can't," I added.

The sorceress nodded emphatically. "We don't get along, so—"

"It's settled, then!" The goddess rose from her chair. "I'll meet you back here when you have my griffins. Don't fail me, mortals!" She clapped her hands with glee. "Oh, I've always wanted to say that!"

She twirled and disappeared in a flash like a fishing lure, leaving nothing behind but a few treble hooks snagged in the carpet.

10

Scrubbing toilets now
At least there's a great reward
Leftover tofu

AFTER BEAR TRAPS and pressure-activated explosives, I didn't think the afternoon could get any worse. Of course, it did.

Once we told Emmie and Josephine what had happened with Britomartis, our hosts sank into despair. They didn't seem reassured that the griffin quest might lead to Georgina's rescue, or that their little girl would remain alive until the spectacular kill-fest the emperor had planned in three days.

Emmie and Jo were so resentful—not just of Britomartis but also of *us*—that they assigned us more chores. Oh, sure, they *claimed* that all guests had to help out. The Waystation was a communal living space, not a hotel, blah, blah, blah.

I knew better. There was no way scrubbing toilets in the Waystation's twenty-six known bathrooms was anything but a punishment.

At least I didn't have to change the hay in the griffins' lofts. By the time Leo was done with that, he looked like the victim of mugging by scarecrow. As for Calypso, she got to plant mung beans all afternoon with Emmie. I ask you, how is that fair?

By dinnertime, I was starving. I hoped for another fresh meal, preferably one prepared *for* me, but Josephine waved listlessly toward the kitchen. "I think there's some leftover tofu enchiladas in the fridge. Agamethus will show you to your rooms."

She and Emmie left us to fend for ourselves.

The glowing orange ghost escorted Calypso to her room first. Agamethus let it be known, via the Magic 8 Ball and lots of gesticulation, that girls and boys always slept in entirely different wings.

I found this ridiculous, but like so many things about my sister and her Hunters, it was beyond logic.

Calypso didn't complain. Before leaving, she turned to us hesitantly and said, "See you in the morning," as if this was a *huge* concession. As if by talking to Leo and me at all, she was going above and beyond the courtesy we deserved. Honestly, I didn't see how anyone could act so haughty after an afternoon planting legumes.

A few minutes later, armed with leftovers from the fridge, Leo and I followed Agamethus to our guest room.

That's right. We had to *share*, which I took as another sign of our hosts' displeasure.

Before leaving us, Agamethus tossed me his Magic 8 Ball.

I frowned. "I didn't ask you a question."

He pointed emphatically at the magic orb.

I turned it over and read APOLLO MUST BRING HER HOME.

I wished the ghost had a face so I might interpret it. "You already told me that."

I tossed the ball back to him, hoping for further explanation. Agamethus hovered expectantly, as if waiting for me to realize something. Then, shoulders slumped, he turned and floated away.

I was in no mood for reheated tofu enchiladas. I gave mine to Leo, who sat cross-legged on his bed and inhaled his food. He still wore Georgina's coveralls with a light frosting of hay. He seemed to have decided that being able to fit in a seven-year-old girl's work clothes was a mark of honor.

I lay back on my bed. I stared at the arched brickwork on the ceiling, wondering if and when it would collapse on my head. "I miss my cot at Camp Half-Blood."

"This place ain't so bad," Leo said. "When I was between foster homes, I slept under the Main Street Bridge in Houston for like a month."

I glanced over. He did look quite comfortable in his nest of hay and blankets.

"You *will* change clothes before turning in?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'll shower in the morning. If I get itchy in the middle of the night, I'll just burst into flames."

"I'm not in the mood for joking. Not after Britomartis."

"Who's joking? Don't worry. I'm sure Jo has this place rigged with fire-suppression equipment."

The thought of waking up burning and covered in extinguisher foam did not appeal to me, but it would be about par for the course.

Leo tapped his fork against his plate. "These tofu enchiladas are *sabrosas*. Gotta get the recipe from Josephine. My homegirl Piper would love them."

"How can you be so calm?" I demanded. "I am going on a dangerous quest

tomorrow with your girlfriend!”

Normally, telling a mortal man that I was going somewhere with his girlfriend would’ve been enough to break his heart.

Leo concentrated on his tofu. “You guys will do fine.”

“But Calypso has no powers! How will she help me?”

“It ain’t about powers, *ese*. You watch. Calypso will still save your sorry butt tomorrow.”

I didn’t like that idea. I didn’t want my sorry butt dependent on a former sorceress who had failed at street fighting and improvisational comedy, especially given her recent mood.

“And if she’s still angry in the morning?” I asked. “What’s going on between you two?”

Leo’s fork hovered over his last enchilada. “It’s just…Six months we were traveling, trying to get to New York. Constant danger. Never staying in the same place longer than a night. Then another month and a half getting to Indianapolis.”

I considered that. I tried to imagine suffering through four times as many trials as I’d already experienced. “I suppose that would put pressure on a new relationship.”

Leo nodded glumly. “Calypso lived on her island for thousands of years, man. She’s all about gardening, weaving tapestries, making her surroundings beautiful. You can’t do any of that when you don’t have a home. Then there’s the fact that I—I took her away.”

“You rescued her,” I said. “The gods were in no hurry to free her from her prison. She might have been on that island for a thousand more years.”

Leo chewed his last bite. He swallowed as if the tofu had turned to clay (which, in my opinion, would not have been a dramatic change).

“Sometimes she’s happy about it,” he said. “Other times, without her powers, without her immortality…it’s like…” He shook his head. “I was going to compare our relationship to a machine. She would hate that.”

“I don’t mind machines.”

He set his plate on the nightstand. “An engine is only built to handle so much stress, you know? Run it too fast for too long, it starts to overheat.”

This I understood. Even my sun chariot got a bit tetchy when I drove it all day in Maserati form. “You need time for maintenance. You haven’t had a chance to find out who you are as a couple without all the danger and constant movement.”

Leo smiled, though his eyes were devoid of their usual impish gleam. “Yeah. Except danger and constant movement—that’s pretty much my life. I don’t—I

don’t know how to fix that. If it’s even fixable.”

He picked a few pieces of straw off his borrowed coveralls. “Enough of that. Better sleep while you can, Sunny. I’m gonna crash.”

“Don’t call me Sunny,” I complained.

But it was too late. When Leo shuts down, he does so with the efficiency of a diesel generator. He flopped down sideways and immediately began to snore.

I was not so lucky. I lay in bed for a long while, counting golden carnivorous sheep in my mind, until at last I drifted into uneasy sleep.

11

Four beheaded dudes
Are too much for one nightmare
Why me? Sob. Sob. Sob.

NATURALLY, I had terrible dreams.

I found myself standing at the foot of a mighty fortress on a moonless night. Before me, rough-hewn walls soared hundreds of feet upward, flecks of feldspar glittering like stars.

At first, I heard nothing but the whistling cries of owls in the woods behind me—a sound that always reminded me of nighttime in ancient Greece. Then, at the base of the stronghold, stone ground against stone. A small hatch appeared where none had been before. A young man crawled out, lugging a heavy sack behind him.

"Come on!" he hissed to someone still in the tunnel.

The man struggled to his feet, the contents of his sack clinking and clanking. Either he was taking out the recycling (unlikely) or he had just stolen a great deal of treasure.

He turned in my direction, and a jolt of recognition made me want to scream like an owl.

It was Trophonius. My son.

You know that feeling when you *suspect* you might have fathered someone thousands of years ago, but you're not really sure? Then you see that child as a grown man, and looking into his eyes, you know beyond a doubt that he is yours? Yes, I'm sure many of you can relate.

I didn't recall who his mother was…the wife of King Erginus, perhaps? She had been quite a beauty. Trophonius's lustrous dark hair reminded me of hers. But his muscular physique and handsome face—that strong chin, that perfect nose, those rosy lips—yes, Trophonius clearly got his knockout good looks from me.

His eyes gleamed with confidence as if to say, *That's right. I just crawled out of a tunnel, and I still look gorgeous.*

From the hatch, the head of another young man emerged. He must have had broader shoulders, because he was having trouble squeezing through.

Trophonius laughed under his breath. "I told you not to eat so much, brother."

Despite his struggle, the other man looked up and grinned. He didn't resemble Trophonius at all. His hair was blond and curly, his face as guileless, goofy, and ugly as a friendly donkey's.

I realized this was Agamethus—Trophonius's half brother. He was no son of mine. The poor boy had the misfortune of being the actual offspring of King Erginus and his wife.

"I can't believe it worked," said Agamethus, wriggling his left arm free.

"Of *course* it worked," said Trophonius. "We're famous architects. We built the temple at Delphi. Why wouldn't King Hyrieus trust us to build his treasury?"

"Complete with a secret thieves' tunnel!"

"Well, he'll never know about that," Trophonius said. "The paranoid old fool will assume his servants stole all his treasure. Now hurry up, Wide Load."

Agamethus was too busy laughing to free himself. He stretched out his arm. "Help me."

Trophonius rolled his eyes. He slung his sack of treasure to the ground—and thereby sprang the trap.

I knew what would happen next. I remembered the tale now that I saw it unfolding, but it was still hard to watch. King Hyrieus was paranoid, all right. Days before, he had scoured the treasury for any possible weaknesses. Upon finding the tunnel, he said nothing to his servants, his building crew, or his architects. He didn't move his treasure. He simply laid a deadly trap and waited to find out exactly who planned to rob him….

Trophonius set the bag of gold right on the trip wire, which only became active once a thief had exited the tunnel. The king intended to catch his betrayers red-handed.

In the nearest tree, a mechanical bow fired a screaming flare skyward, cutting an arc of red flame across the dark. Inside the tunnel, a support beam snapped, crushing Agamethus's chest under a shower of stone.

Agamethus gasped, his free arm flailing. His eyes bulged as he coughed blood. Trophonius cried in horror. He ran to his brother's side and tried to pull him free, but this only made Agamethus scream.

"Leave me," said Agamethus.

"I won't." Tears streaked Trophonius's face. "This is my fault. This was my

idea! I'll get help. I'll—I'll tell the guards—"

"They'll only kill you, too," Agamethus croaked. "Go. While you can. And brother, the king knows my face." He gasped, his breath gurgling. "When he finds my body—"

"Don't talk that way!"

"He'll know you were with me," Agamethus continued, his eyes now clear and calm with the certainty of death. "He'll track you down. He'll declare war on our father. Make sure my body can't be identified."

Agamethus clawed weakly at the knife hanging from his brother's belt.

Trophonius wailed. He understood what his brother was asking. He heard the guards shouting in the distance. They would be here soon.

He raised his voice to the heavens. "Take me instead! Save him, Father, please!"

Trophonius's father, Apollo, chose to ignore his prayer.

I gave you fame, Apollo was thinking. *I let you design my temple at Delphi. Then you used your reputation and talents to become a thief. You brought this upon yourself.*

In despair, Trophonius drew his knife. He kissed his brother's forehead one last time, then laid the blade across Agamethus's neck.

My dream changed.

I stood in a long subterranean chamber like an alternate image of the Waystation's main hall. Overhead, a curved ceiling glittered with white subway tiles. Along either side of the room, where the rail pits would've been in a train depot, open canals of water flowed. Rows of television monitors lined the walls, flashing video clips of a bearded man with curly brown hair, perfect teeth, and brilliant blue eyes.

The videos reminded me of Times Square ads for a late-night talk show host. The man mugged for the camera, laughing, kissing the screen, pretending to be off-balance. In each shot, he wore a different outfit—an Italian business suit, a race-car driver's uniform, hunting fatigues—each cut from the skin of a lion.

A title bounced around the screen in garish colors: THE NEW HERCULES!

Yes. That's what he liked to call himself back in Roman times. He had that hero's shockingly good physique, but he wasn't the actual Hercules. I should know. I'd dealt with Hercules on many occasions. This emperor was more like someone's *idea* of Hercules—an airbrushed, overly muscular caricature.

In the middle of the hall, flanked by bodyguards and attendants, was the man himself, lounging on a white granite throne. Not many emperors can look imperial wearing only lion-skin swim trunks, but Commodus managed. One of his legs was thrown casually over the throne's armrest. His golden abs formed

such a six-pack I imagined I could see the pop-top tabs. With an immensely bored expression, using only two fingers, he twirled a six-foot-long poleax that came very close to threatening his nearest advisor's anatomy.

I wanted to whimper. Not just because I still found Commodus attractive after so many centuries, not just because we had a, er, complicated history, but also because he reminded me what *I* used to be like. Oh, to be able to look in the mirror and see perfection again, not a pudgy awkward boy with a bad complexion!

I forced myself to focus on the other people in the room. Kneeling before the emperor were two people I'd seen in my vision of Nero's penthouse—Marcus the blinged-out jackal boy, and Vortigern the barbarian.

Marcus was trying to explain something to the emperor. He waved his hands desperately. "We tried! Sire, listen!"

The emperor did not seem inclined to listen. His uninterested gaze drifted across the throne room to various amusements: a rack of torture tools, a row of arcade games, a set of weights, and a freestanding target board plastered with… oh, dear, the face of Lester Papadopoulos, bristling with embedded throwing knives.

In the shadows at the back of the room, strange animals moved restlessly in cages. I saw no griffins, but there were other fabled beasts I hadn't seen in centuries. Half a dozen winged Arabian serpents fluttered in an oversize canary cage. Inside a golden pen, a pair of bull-like creatures with huge horns snuffled at a feeding trough. European yales, perhaps? Goodness, those had been rare even back in ancient times.

Marcus kept yammering excuses until, on the emperor's left, a portly man in a crimson business suit snapped, "ENOUGH!"

The advisor made a wide arc around the emperor's spinning poleax. His face was so red and sweaty that, as a god of medicine, I wanted to warn him he was dangerously close to congestive heart failure. He advanced on the two supplicants.

"You are telling us," he snarled, "that you *lost* her. Two strong, capable servants of the Triumvirate lost a little girl. How could that happen?"

Marcus cupped his hands. "Lord Cleander, I don't know! We stopped at a convenience store outside of Dayton. She went to the restroom and—and she disappeared."

Marcus glanced at his companion for support. Vortigern grunted.

Cleander, the red-suited advisor, scowled. "Was there any sort of plant near this restroom?"

Marcus blinked. "Plant?"

“Yes, you fool. The *growing* kind.”

“I…well, there was a clump of dandelions growing from a crack in the pavement by the door, but—”

“What?” yelled Cleander. “You let a daughter of Demeter near a *plant*?”

A daughter of Demeter. My heart felt like it had been launched upward in one of Britomartis’s nets. At first I had wondered if these men were talking about Georgina, but they meant Meg McCaffrey. She had given her escorts the slip.

Marcus gaped like a fish. “Sir, it—it was a just a *weed*!”

“Which is all she needed to teleport away!” screamed Cleander. “You should have *realized* how powerful she is becoming. Gods only know where she is now!”

“Actually,” said the emperor, sending a flash freeze through the room, “I’m a god. And I have no idea.”

He stopped twirling his poleax. He scanned the throne room until his gaze fixed on a blemmyae servant arranging cakes and canapés on a tea cart. She was not in disguise—her chest-face was in full view, though below her belly-chin she wore a maid’s black skirt with a white lace apron.

The emperor took aim. He casually chucked his poleax across the room, the blade burying itself between the maid’s eyes. She staggered, managed to say, “Good shot, my lord,” then crumbled to dust.

The advisors and bodyguards clapped politely.

Commodus waved away their praise. “I’m bored with these two.” He gestured at Marcus and Vortigern. “They failed, yes?”

Cleander bowed. “Yes, my lord. Thanks to them, the daughter of Demeter is on the loose. If she reaches Indianapolis, she could cause us no end of trouble.”

The emperor smiled. “Ah, but Cleander, you failed too, did you not?”

The red-suited man gulped. “Sire, I—I assure you—”

“It was *your* idea to allow Nero to send these idiots. You thought they’d be *helpful* in capturing Apollo. Now the girl has betrayed us. *And* Apollo is somewhere in *my* city, and you haven’t apprehended him yet.”

“Sire, the meddlesome women of the Waystation—”

“That’s right!” the emperor said. “You haven’t found them yet, either. And don’t get me started on all your failures concerning the naming ceremony.”

“B-but, sire! We will have thousands of animals for you to slaughter! Hundreds of captives—”

“BORING! I told you, I want something *creative*. Are you my praetorian prefect or not, Cleander?”

“Y-yes, sire.”

“And so you’re responsible for any failures.”

“But—”

“And you’re boring me,” Commodus added, “which is punishable by death.” He glanced to either side of the throne. “Who’s next in the chain of command? Speak up.”

A young man stepped forward. Not a Germanus bodyguard, but definitely a fighter. His hand rested easily on the pommel of a sword. His face was a patchwork of scars. His clothes were casual—just jeans, a red-and-white T-shirt that read CORNHUSKERS, and a red bandana tied across his curly dark hair—but he held himself with the easy confidence of a practiced killer.

“I am next, sire.”

Commodus inclined his head. “Do it, then.”

Cleander shrieked, “No!”

The Cornhusker moved with blinding speed. His sword flashed. In three fluid slices, three people fell dead, their heads severed from their bodies. On the bright side, Cleander no longer had to worry about congestive heart failure. Neither did Marcus nor Vortigern.

The emperor clapped with delight. “Oh, nice! That was *very* entertaining, Lityerses!”

“Thank you, sire.” The Cornhusker flicked the blood from his blade.

“You are almost as skilled with the sword as I am!” the emperor said. “Have I ever told you how I decapitated a rhinoceros?”

“Yes, my lord, most impressive.” Lityerses’s voice was as bland as oatmeal. “Your permission to clear away these bodies?”

“Of course,” the emperor said. “Now—you’re Midas’s boy, aren’t you?”

Lityerses’s face seemed to develop a few new scars when he scowled. “Yes, sire.”

“But you can’t do the golden-touch thing?”

“No, sire.”

“Pity. You *do* kill people well, though. That’s good. Your first orders: Find Meg McCaffrey. And Apollo. Bring them to me, alive if possible, and…hmm. There was something else.”

“The naming ceremony, sire?”

“Yes!” The emperor grinned. “Yes, yes. I have some wonderful ideas to spice up the games, but since Apollo and the girl are running around loose, we should move forward our plan for the griffins. Go to the zoo right away. Bring the animals here for safekeeping. Manage all that for me, and I won’t kill you. Fair?”

Lityerses’s neck muscles tensed. “Of course, sire.”

As the new praetorian prefect barked orders to the guards, telling them to

drag away the decapitated bodies, someone spoke my name.

"Apollo. Wake up."

My eyes fluttered open. Calypso stood over me. The room was dark. Nearby, Leo was still snoring away in his bed.

"It's almost first light," said the sorceress. "We need to get going."

I tried to blink away the remnants of my dreams. Agamethus's Magic 8 Ball seemed to float to the surface of my mind. *Apollo must bring her home.*

I wondered if the ghost had meant Georgina, or another girl whom I very much wanted to find.

Calypso shook my shoulder. "Come on! You wake up very slowly for a sun god."

"W-what? Where?"

"The zoo," she said. "Unless you want to wait around here for morning chores."

12

I sing of taters!
Chili, sweet potato, blue!
Why? Ask my arrow

CALYPSO KNEW how to motivate me.

The thought of scrubbing toilets again was more terrifying than my dreams.

We walked the dark streets in the cold early morning, keeping an eye out for polite mobs of killer blemmyae, but no one bothered us. Along the way, I explained my nightmares to Calypso.

I spelled out the name C-O-M-M-O-D-U-S, in case saying it aloud might attract the god-emperor's attention. Calypso had never heard of him. Of course, she'd been stuck on her island for the last few millennia. I doubted she would recognize the names of many people who hadn't washed up on her shores. She barely knew who Hercules was. I found that refreshing. Hercules was *such* an attention hog.

"You know this emperor personally?" she asked.

I convinced myself I wasn't blushing. The wind was just stinging my face. "We met when he was younger. We had a surprising amount in common. Once he became emperor…" I sighed. "You know how it is. He got too much power and fame at a tender age. It messed with his head. Like Justin, Britney, Lindsay, Amanda, Amadeus—"

"I don't know any of those people."

"We need to spend more time on your pop culture lessons."

"No, please." Calypso struggled with the zipper of her coat.

Today she was wearing an assortment of borrowed clothing she must have picked out in total darkness: a battered silver parka, probably from Emmie's Hunters of Artemis days; a blue INDY 500 T-shirt; an ankle-length brown skirt over black leggings; and bright purple-and-green workout shoes. Meg McCaffrey would have approved of her fashion sense.

“What about the sword-wielding Cornhusker?” Calypso asked.

“Lityerses, son of King Midas. I don’t know much about him, or why he is serving the emperor. We can only hope to get in and out of the zoo before he shows up. I don’t relish the idea of meeting him in combat.”

Calypso flexed her fingers, perhaps remembering what happened the last time she punched someone. “At least your friend Meg escaped her escorts,” she noted. “That’s good news.”

“Perhaps.” I wanted to believe Meg was rebelling against Nero. That she had finally seen the truth about her monstrous stepfather and would now rush to my side, ready to aid me in my quests and stop giving me vexing orders.

Unfortunately, I knew firsthand how hard it was to extricate oneself from an unhealthy relationship. Nero’s hooks were buried deep in the girl’s psyche. The idea of Meg on the run without a destination, terrified, pursued by the minions of two different emperors…that did not reassure me. I hoped she at least had her friend Peaches the grain spirit to rely on, but I had seen no sign of him in my visions.

“And Trophonius?” asked Calypso. “Do you often forget when someone is your child?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“We’re looking for a dangerous Oracle that drives people insane. The spirit of this Oracle happens to be your son, who just might hold a grudge against you because you didn’t answer his prayers, thus forcing him to cut off his own brother’s head. Those facts would have been good to know.”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind! It’s a very small *mortal* mind.”

“At least we agree on the size of your brain.”

“Oh, stick a brick in it,” I muttered. “I was hoping for advice on how to proceed. You’re useless.”

“My advice is to stop being such a *gloutos*.”

The word meant *buttocks*, except that in ancient Greek it had a much ruder connotation. I tried to think of a withering reply, but the ancient Greek phrase for *I know you are, but what am I?* eluded me.

Calypso ruffled the fletching in my quiver. “If you want advice, why not ask your arrow? Perhaps he knows how to rescue griffins.”

“Humph.” I did not like Calypso’s advice for seeking advice. I didn’t see what a Shakespearean-talking arrow could contribute to our present quest. Then again, I had nothing to lose except my temper. If the arrow annoyed me too much, I could always fire him into some monster’s gloutos.

I pulled out the Arrow of Dodona. Immediately, his sonorous voice spoke in my mind, the shaft resonating with each word.

LO, it said. *THE MORTAL DOTH FINALLY SHOW SENSE*.

"I've missed you, too," I said.

"It's talking?" Calypso asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. O, Arrow of Dodona, I have a question for you."

HITTEST ME WITH THY BEST SHOT.

I explained about my visions. I'm sure I looked ridiculous, talking to an arrow as we strolled along West Maryland Street. Outside the Indiana Convention Center, I tripped and nearly impaled myself through the eye, but Calypso didn't even bother to laugh. During our travels together she'd seen me humiliate myself in much more spectacular ways.

Talking proved a slower way of bringing a projectile up to speed than by simply launching it from a bow, but at last I succeeded.

FIE. The arrow shuddered in my hand. *THOU HAST GIVEN ME NOT A QUESTION BUT A STORY*.

I wondered if it was testing me—gauging just how far it could push me before I snapped it in two. I might have done so long ago except I feared I would then have *two* fragments of a talking arrow, which would give me bad advice in harmony.

"Very well," I said. "How can we find the griffins? Where is Meg McCaffrey? How can we defeat the local emperor, free his prisoners, and take back control of the Oracle of Trophonius?"

NOW HAST THOU ASKED TOO MANY QUESTIONS, the arrow intoned. *MY WISDOM DOTH NOT SPEW FORTH ANSWERS AS IF 'TWERE GOOGLE.*

Yes, the arrow was definitely tempting me to snap it.

"Let's start simply, then," I said. "How do we free the griffins?"

GOEST THOU TO THE ZOO.

"We're already doing that."

FINDEST THOU THE GRIFFINS' ENCLOSURE.

"Yes, but *where*? And don't tell me *at the zoo*. Where exactly in the Indianapolis Zoo are the griffins being kept?"

SEEKEST THOU THE CHOO-CHOO.

"The choo-choo."

IST THERE AN ECHO IN HERE?

"Fine! We look for a choo—a train. Once we locate the griffins, how do we free them?"

LO, THOU SHALT GAIN THE BEASTS' TRUST WITH TATER TOTS.

"Tater Tots?"

I waited for clarification, or even just another snarky comment. The arrow remained silent. With a snort of disgust, I returned it to my quiver.

“You know,” Calypso said, “hearing only one side of that conversation was very confusing.”

“’Twas not much better hearing both sides,” I assured her. “Something about a train. And children made of potatoes.”

“Tater Tots are food. Leo—” Her voice caught on his name. “Leo likes them.”

My vast experience with women told me that Calypso was either feeling remorseful about her argument with Leo yesterday or she got emotional on the subject of Tater Tots. I wasn’t inclined to find out which.

“Whatever ist the case, I knowest not—” I spat the Shakespearean English off my tongue. “I don’t know what the arrow’s advice means. Perhaps when we get to the zoo, it will make sense.”

“Because that happens so often when we arrive in new places,” Calypso said. “Suddenly everything makes sense.”

“You have a point.” I sighed. “But much like the point on my talking arrow, it does us no good. Shall we continue?”

We used the Washington Street Bridge to cross the White River, which was not at all white. It flowed wide, sluggish, and brown between cement retaining walls, the water breaking around islands of scrubby bushes like acne patches (with which I was now all too familiar). It reminded me strangely of the Tiber in Rome—another underwhelming, long-neglected river.

Yet world-altering history had been made along the banks of the Tiber. I shuddered to think what plans Commodus had for this city. And if the White River fed the canals I’d glimpsed in his throne room, his lair might be close. Which meant that his new prefect, Lityerses, might already be at the zoo. I decided to walk faster.

The Indianapolis Zoo was tucked away in a park just off West Washington. We crossed an empty parking lot, heading toward the turquoise marquee of the main entrance. A banner out front read WILDLY CUTE! For a moment I thought perhaps the zoo staff had heard I was coming and decided to welcome me. Then I realized the banner was just an advertisement for koala bears. As if koalas needed advertising.

Calypso frowned at the shuttered ticket booths. “Nobody here. The place is locked up tight.”

“That *was* the idea,” I reminded her. “The fewer mortals around, the better.”

“But how do we get in?”

“If only someone could control wind spirits and carry us over the fence.”

“If only some god could teleport us,” she countered. “Or snap his fingers and bring the griffins to us.”

I folded my arms. “I’m beginning to remember why we exiled you on that island for three thousand years.”

“Three thousand five hundred and sixty-eight. It would have been longer if you’d had your way.”

I hadn’t meant to start this argument again, but Calypso made it so easy. “You were on a tropical island with pristine beaches, aerial servants, and a lavishly appointed cave.”

“Which made Ogygia not a prison?”

I was tempted to blast her with godly power, except…well, I didn’t have any. “You don’t miss your island, then?”

She blinked as if I’d thrown sand in her face. “I—no. That’s not the point. I was kept in exile. I had no one—”

“Oh, please. You want to know what *real* exile feels like? This is my third time as a mortal. Stripped of my powers. Stripped of immortality. I can *die*, Calypso.”

“Me too,” she snapped.

“Yes, but you *chose* to go with Leo. You gave up your immortality for love! You’re as bad as Hemithea!”

I hadn’t realized how much anger was behind that last shot until I let it fly. My voice resounded across the parking lot. Somewhere in the zoo, a rudely awakened tropical bird squawked in protest.

Calypso’s expression hardened. “Right.”

“I only meant—”

“Save it.” She gazed down the perimeter of the fence. “Shall we find a place to climb over?”

I tried to formulate a gallant apology that would also completely vindicate my position, but I decided to let the matter drop. My shout might have woken up more than the toucans. We needed to hurry.

We found a breaching point where the fence was slightly lower. Even in a skirt, Calypso proved the more agile climber. She made it over the top with no problem, while I snagged my shoe on barbed wire and found myself hanging upside down. It was complete luck that I did not fall into the tiger habitat.

“Shut up,” I told Calypso when she pulled me free.

“I didn’t say anything!”

The tiger glared at us from the other side of his enclosure glass as if to say, *Why are you bothering me if you haven’t brought me breakfast?*

I’d always found tigers to be sensible creatures.

Calypso and I crept through the zoo, keeping a lookout for mortals or imperial guards. Except for a zookeeper hosing down the lemur display, we saw

no one.

We stopped in an area that seemed to be the park's main crossroads. To our left stood a carousel. To our right, orangutans lounged in the trees of a large netted compound. Strategically placed around the plaza were several gift shops and cafés, all closed. Signs pointed toward various attractions: OCEAN, PLAINS, JUNGLE, FLIGHTS OF FANCY.

"'Flights of fancy,'" I said. "Surely they would file griffins under fanciful flights."

Calypso scanned our surroundings. She had unnerving eyes—dark brown and intensely focused, not unlike Artemis's gaze when she took aim at a target. I suppose on Ogygia Calypso had had many years of practice staring at the horizon, waiting for someone or something interesting to appear.

"Your arrow mentioned a train," she said. "There's a sign for a train ride."

"Yes, but my arrow also said something about Tater Tots. I think it's getting a bit warped."

Calypso pointed. "There."

At the nearest outdoor café, next to a shuttered serving window, a lunch menu was posted on the wall. I scanned the selections.

"Four different kinds of Tater Tots?" I felt overwhelmed by culinary confusion. "Why would anyone need so many? Chili. Sweet potato. *Blue?* How can a Tot be—?" I froze.

For a nanosecond, I wasn't sure what had startled me. Then I realized my keen ears had picked up on a sound in the distance—a man's voice.

"What is it?" Calypso asked.

"Shh." I listened more intently.

I hoped I might have been mistaken. Perhaps I'd simply heard some exotic bird with a gravelly croak, or the zookeeper cursing as he hosed out lemur poop. But no. Even in my diminished mortal state, my hearing was exceptional.

The voice spoke again, familiar and much closer. "You three, that way. You two, with me."

I touched Calypso's jacket sleeve. "It's Lityerses, the Cornhusker."

The sorceress muttered another Minoan curse, naming a part of Zeus's body that I did *not* want to think about. "We need to hide."

Unfortunately, Lityerses was approaching from the way we'd come. Judging from the sound of his voice, we had only seconds before he'd arrive. The crossroads offered any number of escape routes, but all of them would be within Lityerses's line of sight.

Only one place was close enough to offer cover.

"When in doubt," Calypso said, "Tater Tots."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me around the back of the café.

13

Fast-food restaurant
My life goal is realized
Any fries with that?

WHEN I WAS A GOD, I would've been pleased to have a beautiful woman pull me behind a building. But as Lester with Calypso, I was more likely to get killed than kissed.

We crouched next to a stack of milk crates by the kitchen entrance. The area smelled of cooking grease, pigeon droppings, and chlorine from the nearby children's splash park. Calypso rattled the locked door, then glared at me.

"Help!" she hissed.

"What am *I* supposed to do?"

"Well, now would be a good time to have a burst of godly strength!"

I should never have told her and Leo about that. Once, when facing Nero at Camp Half-Blood, my superhuman power had briefly returned, allowing me to overcome the emperor's Germani. I'd thrown one of them into the sky where, for all I knew, he was still in low earth orbit. But that moment had quickly passed. My strength hadn't returned since.

Regardless, Leo and Calypso seemed to think I could summon godly bursts of awesomeness anytime I wanted, just because I was a former god. I found that unfair.

I gave the door a try. I yanked the handle and almost pulled my fingers out of their sockets.

"Ow," I muttered. "Mortals have gotten good at making doors. Now, back in the Bronze Age—"

Calypso shushed me.

Our enemies' voices were getting closer. I couldn't hear Lityerses, but two other men were conversing in a guttural language that sounded like ancient Gallic. I doubted they were zookeepers.

Calypso frantically pulled a bobby pin from her hair. Aha, so her lovely coiffed locks did not stay in place by magic! She pointed at me, then pointed around the corner. I thought she was telling me to flee and save myself. That would have been a sensible suggestion. Then I realized she was asking me to keep watch.

I didn't know what good that would do, but I peered over the rampart of milk crates and waited for Germani to come and kill us. I could hear them at the front of the café, rattling the shutter over the order window, then conversing briefly with lots of grunts and grumbling. Knowing the emperor's bodyguards, they were probably saying something like *Kill? Kill. Bash heads? Bash heads.*

I wondered why Lityerses had split his people into two groups. Surely they already knew where the griffins were being kept. Why, then, were they searching the park? Unless, of course, they were searching for intruders, specifically *us*….

Calypso snapped her hairpin in two. She inserted the metal pieces in the door lock and began to wriggle them, her eyes closed as if she were in deep concentration.

Ridiculous, I thought. That only works in movies and Homeric epics!

Click. The door swung inward. Calypso waved me inside. She yanked the pin shards out of the lock, then followed me across the threshold, gently closing the door behind us. She turned the dead bolt just before someone outside shook the handle.

A gruff voice muttered in Gallic, probably something like *No luck. Bash heads elsewhere.*

Footsteps receded.

I finally remembered to breathe.

I faced Calypso. "How did you pick the lock?"

She stared at the broken hairpin in her hand. "I—I thought about weaving."

"Weaving?"

"I can still *weave*. I spent thousands of years practicing at the loom. I thought maybe—I don't know—manipulating pins in a lock wouldn't be too different than weaving thread in a loom."

The two things sounded *very* different to me, but I couldn't argue with the results.

"So it wasn't magic, then?" I tried to contain my disappointment. Having a few wind spirits at our command would have been very helpful.

"No," she said. "You'll know when I get my magic back, because you'll find yourself being tossed across Indianapolis."

"That's something to look forward to."

I scanned the dark interior of the snack bar. Against the back wall were the

basics: a sink, a deep fryer, a stove top, two microwaves. Under the counter sat two horizontal freezers.

How did I know the basics of a fast-food kitchen, you ask? I had discovered the singer Pink while she was working at McDonalds. I found Queen Latifah at Burger King. I've spent a fair amount of time in such places. You can't discount *any* site where you might find talent.

I checked the first freezer. Inside, wreathed in cold mist, were carefully labeled boxes of ready-to-cook meals, but nothing that read TATER TOTS.

The second freezer was locked.

"Calypso," I said, "could you weave this open?"

"Who's useless now, eh?"

In the interest of getting my way, I decided not to answer. I stepped back as Calypso worked her non-magical skills. She popped this lock even faster than the first.

"Well done." I lifted the freezer lid. "Ah."

Hundreds of packages were wrapped in white butcher paper, each labeled in black marker.

Calypso squinted at the descriptions. "*Carnivorous horse mix? Combat ostrich cubes?* And…*griffin taters*." She turned to me with a horrified look. "Surely they're not grinding animals into *food*?"

I remembered a long-ago banquet with the spiteful King Tantalus, who had served the gods a stew made from his own son. With humans, anything was possible. But in this case, I didn't think the café was putting mythical wildlife on the menu.

"These items are under lock and key," I said. "I'm guessing they've been set aside as treats for the zoo's rarest animals. That's a mix of food *for* a carnivorous horse, not a mixture *of* carnivorous horse."

Calypso looked only slightly less nauseated. "What in the world is a combat ostrich?"

The question triggered an old memory. I was overwhelmed by a vision as powerful as the stench of an unwashed lemur cage.

I found myself lounging on a couch in the campaign tent of my friend Commodus. He was in the midst of a military campaign with his father, Marcus Aurelius, but nothing about the tent suggested the harsh life of the Roman legion. Overhead, a white silk canopy billowed in the gentle breeze. In one corner, a musician sat discreetly serenading us with his lyre. Under our feet spread the finest rugs from the eastern provinces—each one as expensive as an entire villa in Rome. Between our two couches, a table was spread with an afternoon snack of roast boar, pheasant, salmon, and fruit spilling from a solid

gold cornucopia.

I was amusing myself by throwing grapes at Commodus's mouth. Of course, I never missed unless I wanted to, but it was fun to watch the fruit bounce off Commodus's nose.

"You are *terrible*," he teased me.

And you are perfect, I thought, but I merely smiled.

He was eighteen. In mortal form, I appeared to be a youth of the same age, but even with my godly enhancements I could hardly have been more handsome than the *princeps*. Despite his easy life, being born into the purple of the Imperial Household, Commodus was the very model of athletic perfection—his body lithe and muscular, his golden hair in ringlets around his Olympian face. His physical strength was already renowned, drawing comparisons to the legendary hero Hercules.

I threw another grape. He caught it in his hand and studied the little orb. "Oh, Apollo…" He knew my real identity, yes. We had been friends, *more* than friends, for almost a month at that point. "I get so weary of these campaigns. My father has been at war virtually his entire reign!"

"Such a hard life for you." I gestured at the opulence around us.

"Yes, but it's *ridiculous*. Tromping around Danubian forests, stamping out barbarian tribes that are really no threat to Rome. What's the point of being emperor if you're never in the capital having fun?"

I nibbled on a piece of boar meat. "Why not talk to your father? Ask for a furlough?"

Commodus snorted. "You know what he'll do—give me another lecture on duty and morality. He is so virtuous, so perfect, so esteemed."

He put those words in air circles (since air quotes had not yet been invented). I could certainly sympathize with his feelings. Marcus Aurelius was the sternest, most powerful father in the world aside from my own father, Zeus. Both loved to lecture. Both loved to remind their offspring how lucky they were, how privileged, how far short they fell of their fathers' expectations. And of course, both had gorgeous, talented, tragically underappreciated sons.

Commodus squished his grape and watched the juice trickle down his fingers. "My father made me his junior co-emperor when I was *fifteen*, Apollo. It's stifling. All duty, all the time. Then he married me off to that horrid girl Bruttia Crispina. Who names their child *Bruttia*?"

I didn't mean to laugh at the expense of his distant wife…but part of me was pleased when he talked badly about her. I wanted all his attention for myself.

"Well, someday you'll be the sole emperor," I said. "Then *you* can make the rules."

“I’ll make peace with the barbarians,” he said immediately. “Then we’ll go home and celebrate with games. The *best* games, all the time. I’ll gather the most exotic animals in the world. I’ll fight them personally in the Colosseum—tigers, elephants, ostriches.”

I laughed at that. “Ostriches? Have you ever even *seen* an ostrich?”

“Oh, yes.” He got a wistful look in his eyes. “Amazing creatures. If you trained them to fight, perhaps designed some sort of armor for them, they would be *incredible*.”

“You’re a handsome idiot.” I threw another grape, which bounced off his forehead.

A brief flash of anger washed over his face. I knew my sweet Commodus could have an ugly temper. He was a little too fond of slaughter. But what did I care? I was a god. I could speak to him in ways no one else dared.

The tent flap opened. A centurion stepped inside and saluted crisply, but his face was stricken, gleaming with sweat. “Princeps…” His voice quavered. “It’s your father. He…he is…”

He never spoke the word *dead*, but it seemed to float into the tent all around us, sapping the heat from the air. The lyre player stopped on a major seventh chord.

Commodus looked at me, panic in his eyes.

“Go,” I said, as calmly as I could, forcing down my misgivings. “You will always have my blessings. You will do fine.”

But I already suspected what would happen: the young man I knew and loved was about to be consumed by the emperor he would become.

He rose and kissed me one last time. His breath smelled of grapes. Then he left the tent—walking, as the Romans would say, into the mouth of the wolf.

“Apollo.” Calypso nudged my arm.

“Don’t go!” I pleaded. Then my past life burned away.

The sorceress was frowning at me. “What do you mean *don’t go*? Did you have another vision?”

I scanned the dark kitchen of the snack bar. “I—I’m fine. What’s going on?”

Calypso pointed to the freezer. “Look at the prices.”

I swallowed down the bitter taste of grapes and boar meat. In the freezer, on the corner of each white butcher-paper package, a price was written in pencil. By far the most expensive: griffin taters, $15,000 per serving.

“I’m not good at modern currency,” I admitted, “but isn’t that a bit pricey for a meal?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Calypso said. “I know the *S* symbol with the line through it means American dollars, but the amount…?” She

shrugged.

I found it unfair that I was adventuring with someone as clueless as I was. A modern demigod could have easily told us, and they also would have had useful twenty-first-century skills. Leo Valdez could repair machines. Percy Jackson could drive a car. I would even have settled for Meg McCaffrey and her garbage-bag-throwing prowess, though I knew what Meg would say about our present predicament: *You guys are dumb.*

I pulled out a packet of griffin taters and unwrapped one corner. Inside, small frozen cubes of shredded potato gleamed with a golden metallic coating.

"Are Tater Tots usually sprayed with precious metal?" I asked.

Calypso picked one up. "I don't think so. But griffins like gold. My father told me that ages ago."

I shuddered. I recalled her father, General Atlas, unleashing a flock of griffins on me during the Titans' first war with the gods. Having your chariot swarmed by eagle-headed lions is not something you easily forget.

"So we take these taters to feed the griffins," I guessed. "With luck, this will help us win their trust." I pulled the Arrow of Dodona from my quiver. "Is that what you had in mind, Most Frustrating of Arrows?"

The arrow vibrated. *VERILY, THOU ART DENSER THAN A COMBAT OSTRICH CUBE*.

"What did he say?" Calypso asked.

"He said yes."

From the counter, Calypso grabbed a paper menu with a map of the zoo on it. She pointed to an orange loop circling the PLAINS area. "Here."

The loop was labeled TRAIN RIDE, the least creative name I could imagine. At the bottom, in a map key, was a more detailed explanation: TRAIN RIDE! A LOOK AT THE ZOO BEHIND THE ZOO!

"Well," I said, "at least they advertise the fact that they have a secret zoo behind the zoo. That was nice of them."

"I think it's time to ride the choo-choo," Calypso agreed.

From the front of the café came a crashing sound, like a Germanus had tripped over a trash can.

"Stop that!" barked Lityerses. "You, stay here and keep watch. If they show, capture them—don't kill them. You, come with me. We need those griffins."

I counted silently to five, then whispered to Calypso, "Are they gone?"

"Let me use my super vision to look through this wall and check," she said. "Oh, wait."

"You are a terrible person."

She pointed to the map. "If Lityerses left one guard at the crossroads, it will

be difficult to get out of here and reach the train without him seeing us."

"Well," I said, "I suppose we could go back to the Waystation and tell Britomartis that we tried."

Calypso threw a frozen golden Tater Tot at me. "When you were a god, if some heroes had returned empty-handed from a quest and told you *Oh, sorry, Apollo. We tried,* would you be understanding?"

"Certainly not! I would incinerate them! I would…Oh. I see your point." I wrung my hands. "Then what do we do? I don't feel like being incinerated. It hurts."

"Perhaps there's a way." Calypso traced her finger across the map to a section labeled MEERKAT, REPTILE & SNAKE, which sounded like the worst law firm ever.

"I have an idea," she said. "Bring your Tots and follow me."

14

Yeah, we got the skills
Fake hexes and shooting feet
Teach you ’bout pancakes

I DID NOT WISH to follow Calypso, with or without my Tots.

Sadly, my only other option was to hide in the café until the emperor’s men found me or the café manager arrived and impressed me into service as a short-order cook.

Calypso led the way, darting from hiding place to hiding place like the urban ninja she was. I spotted the lone Germanus on sentry duty, about fifty feet across the plaza, but he was busy studying the carousel. He pointed his polearm warily at the painted horses as if they might be carnivorous.

We made it to the far side of the crossroads without attracting his attention, but I was still nervous. For all we knew, Lityerses might have multiple groups sweeping the park. On a telephone pole near the souvenir shop, a security camera stared down at us. If the Triumvirate was as powerful as Nero claimed, they could easily control surveillance inside the Indianapolis Zoo. Perhaps that was why Lityerses was searching for us. He already knew we were here.

I thought about shooting the camera with an arrow, but it was probably too late. Cameras loved me. No doubt my face was all over the security office monitors.

Calypso’s plan was to circumvent the orangutans and cut through the reptile display, skirting the park perimeter until we reached the train depot. Instead, as we passed the entrance to the ape habitat, voices of an approaching Germanus patrol startled us. We dove into the orangutan center for cover.

All right…*I* got startled and dove for cover. Calypso hissed, “No, you idiot!” then followed me inside. Together we crouched behind a retaining wall as two Germani strolled past, chatting casually about head-bashing techniques.

I glanced to my right and stifled a yelp. On the other side of a glass wall, a

large orangutan was staring at me, his amber eyes curious. He made some hand gestures—sign language? Agamethus might have known. Judging from the great ape's expression, he was not terribly delighted to see me. Alas, among the great apes, only humans are capable of proper awe for the gods. On the plus side for orangutans, they have *amazing* orange fur that no human could possibly rival.

Calypso nudged my leg. "We need to keep moving."

We scurried deeper into the display room. Our simian movements must have amused the orangutan. He made a deep barking noise.

"Shut up!" I stage-whispered back at him.

At the far exit, we huddled behind a curtain of camouflage netting. I cradled my taters and tried to steady my breathing.

Next to me, Calypso hummed under her breath—a nervous habit of hers. I wished she would stop. Whenever she hummed a tune I knew, I had the urge to sing harmony very loudly, which would have given away our position.

At last, I whispered, "I think the coast is clear."

I stepped out and smacked straight into another Germanus. Honestly, how many barbarians did Commodus have? Was he buying them in bulk?

For a moment, all three of us were too surprised to speak or move. Then the barbarian made a rumbling sound in his chest as if about to shout for backup.

"Hold these!" I thrust my package of griffin food into his arms.

Reflexively, he took them. After all, a man giving up his Tots is a gesture of surrender in many cultures. He frowned at the package as I stepped back, slung my bow off my shoulder, fired, and planted an arrow in his left foot.

He howled, dropping the Tater Tots package. I scooped it up and ran, Calypso close behind me.

"Nicely done," she offered.

"Except for the fact that he probably alerted—Veer left!"

Another Germanus came barreling out of the reptile area. We scrambled around him and ran toward a sign that said SKYLINE.

In the distance loomed an aerial tram—wires strung from tower to tower above the treetops, a single green gondola hanging about fifty feet in the air. I wondered if we could use the ride to reach the secret zoo area, or at least gain a height advantage, but the gondola house entrance was fenced off and padlocked.

Before I could ask Calypso to work her hairpin hocus-pocus, the Germani cornered us. The one from the reptile area advanced, his polearm leveled at our chests. The one from the orangutan house came snarling and limping behind, my arrow still sticking out of his bloody leather boot.

I nocked another arrow, but there was no way I could bring them both down before they killed us. I'd seen Germani take six or seven arrows to the heart and

still keep fighting.

Calypso muttered, “Apollo, when I curse you, pretend to faint.”

“What?”

She wheeled on me and shouted, “You have failed me for the last time, slave!”

She made a series of hand gestures I recognized from ancient times—hexes and curses that no one had ever dared to make in my direction. I was tempted to slap her. Instead, I did as she asked: I gasped and collapsed.

Through my half-lidded eyes, I watched Calypso turn on our enemies.

“Now it is *your* turn, fools!” She began making the same rude gestures toward the Germani.

The first one stopped. His face paled. He glanced at me lying on the ground, then turned and fled, barreling past his friend.

The Germanus with the wounded foot hesitated. Judging from the hatred in his eyes, he wanted revenge for the missile weapon that had ruined his left boot.

Calypso, undaunted, waved her arms and began to incant. Her tone made it sound as if she were raising the worst daimons from Tartarus, though her words, in ancient Phoenician, were actually a recipe for making pancakes.

The wounded Germanus yelped and hobbled away, leaving a trail of smeared red prints behind him.

Calypso offered me a hand and pulled me up. “Let’s move. I’ve only bought us a few seconds.”

“How did you—Did your magic return?”

“I wish,” she said. “I faked it. Half of magic is *acting* like it will work. The other half is picking a superstitious mark. They’ll be back. With reinforcements.”

I’ll admit I was impressed. Her “hexing” had certainly unnerved me.

I made a quick gesture to ward off evil, just in case Calypso was better than she realized. Then we ran together along the perimeter fence.

At the next crossroads, Calypso said, “This way to the train.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded. “I’m good at memorizing maps. Once, I made one of Ogygia; reproduced every square foot of that island. It was the only way I kept myself sane.”

This sounded like a terrible way to keep oneself sane, but I let her lead the way. Behind us, more Germani were shouting, but they seemed to be heading toward the Skyline gates we’d just left. I allowed myself to hope that the train station might be clear.

HA-HA-HA. It was not.

On the tracks sat a miniature train—a bright green steam engine with a line

of open passenger cars. Next to it on the station platform, under an ivy-covered canopy, Lityerses stood with his feet planted, his unsheathed sword resting over his shoulder like a hobo's bindle. A battered leather cuirass was strapped over his Cornhuskers shirt. His dark curly hair hung in tendrils over his red bandana, making it look as if a large spider were crouched on his head, ready to spring.

"Welcome." The prefect's smile might have seemed friendly, except for the crosshatching of scars on his face. He touched something on his ear—a Bluetooth device, perhaps. "They're here at the station," he announced. "Converge on me, but *slow and calm*. I'm fine. I want these two alive."

He shrugged at us apologetically. "My men can be overenthusiastic when it comes to killing. Especially after you've made them look like fools."

"It was our pleasure." I doubt I pulled off the self-assured, swashbuckling tone I was going for. My voice cracked. Sweat beaded on my face. I held my bow sideways like an electric guitar, which was not proper shooting stance, and in my other hand, instead of an arrow that might have been useful, I held a package of frozen Tater Tots.

It was probably just as well. In my dream, I'd seen how rapidly Lityerses could swing his sword. If I tried to fire on him, our heads would be rolling on the pavement before I drew back my bowstring.

"You're able to use a phone," I noticed. "Or a walkie-talkie, or whatever that is. I hate it when the bad guys get to talk to each other and we can't."

Lityerses's laugh was like a file across metal. "Yes. The Triumvirate likes to have certain advantages."

"I don't suppose you'd tell us how they manage it—blocking demigod communications?"

"You won't live long enough for that to matter. Now, drop your bow. As for your friend…" He sized up Calypso. "Keep your hands at your side. No sudden curses. I'd hate to chop off that pretty head of yours."

Calypso smiled sweetly. "I was just thinking the same thing about you. Drop your sword and I won't destroy you."

She was a good actor. I made a mental note to recommend her to my Mount Olympus invitation-only summer camp, *Method Acting with the Muses*—if we got out of this alive.

Lityerses chuckled. "That's good. I like you. But in about sixty seconds, a dozen Germani are going to swarm this depot. They will *not* ask as politely as I did." He took a step forward and swung his sword to his side.

I tried to think of a brilliant plan. Unfortunately, the only thing that came to mind was weeping in terror. Then, above Lityerses, the ivy rustled on the canopy.

The swordsman didn't seem to notice. I wondered if orangutans were playing up there, or perhaps some Olympian gods had gathered for a picnic to watch me die. Or maybe…The thought was too much to wish for, but in the interest of buying time, I dropped my bow.

"Apollo," Calypso hissed. "What are you doing?"

Lityerses answered for me. "He's being smart. Now, where's the third member of your little party?"

I blinked. "It—it's just the two of us."

Lityerses's facial scars rippled, white lines on tan skin, like the ridges of a sand dune. "Come now. You flew into the city on a dragon. Three passengers. I *very much* want to see Leo Valdez again. We have unfinished business."

"You know Leo?" Despite the danger we were in, I felt a small sense of relief. Finally, some villain wanted to kill Leo more than he wanted to kill me. That was progress!

Calypso didn't seem so happy. She stepped toward the swordsman with her fists clenched. "What do you want with Leo?"

Lityerses narrowed his eyes. "You're not the same girl who was with him before. Her name was Piper. You wouldn't happen to be Leo's girlfriend?"

Red blotches appeared on Calypso's cheeks and neck.

Lityerses brightened. "Oh, you are! That's wonderful! I can use you to hurt him."

Calypso snarled. "You *will not* hurt him."

Above Lityerses, the canopy roof shook again, as if a thousand rats were scurrying through the rafters. The vines seemed to be growing, the foliage turning thicker and darker.

"Calypso," I said, "step back."

"Why should I?" she demanded. "This Cornhusker just threatened—"

"Calypso!" I grabbed her wrist and yanked her from the shadow of the canopy just as it collapsed on top of Lityerses. The swordsman disappeared under hundreds of pounds of shingles, lumber, and ivy.

I surveyed the mass of quivering vines. I saw no orangutans, no gods, no one who might have been responsible for the collapse.

"She *must* be here," I muttered.

"Who?" Calypso stared at me with wide eyes. "What just happened?"

I wanted to hope. I was afraid to hope. Whatever the case, we couldn't stay. Lityerses was shouting and struggling under the wreckage, which meant he wasn't dead. His Germani would be here any second.

"Let's get out of here." I pointed to the green locomotive. "I'm driving."

15

Drivin' the green train
I'm all like, Choo-choo! Choo-choo!
Can't catch me!—Oh, poop!

A SLOW-MOTION GETAWAY was not what I had in mind.

We both jumped onto the conductor's bench, which was barely wide enough for one, and jostled for space while punching pedals and turning random levers.

"I told you, *I'll* drive!" I yelled. "If I can drive the sun, I can drive this!"

"This isn't the sun!" Calypso elbowed me in the ribs. "It's a model train."

I found the ignition switch. The train lurched into motion. (Calypso will claim *she* found the ignition switch. This is a blatant lie.) I pushed Calypso off the bench and onto the ground. Since the train was only going half a mile an hour, she simply stood up, brushed off her skirt, and walked alongside me, glaring.

"*That's* top speed?" she demanded. "Push some more levers!"

Behind us, from somewhere under the wreckage of the canopy, came a mighty "BLARG!" Ivy shivered as Lityerses tried to bust his way out.

A half dozen Germani appeared at the far end of the platform. (Commodus was *definitely* buying his barbarians by the imperial family-size pack.) The bodyguards stared at the screaming mass of roof wreckage, then at us choo-chooing away. Rather than give chase, they began clearing the beams and vines to free their boss. Given the progress we were making, they probably assumed they'd have plenty of time to come after us.

Calypso hopped onto the running board. She pointed to the controls. "Try the blue pedal."

"The blue pedal is never the right one!"

She kicked it with her foot. We shot forward at three times our previous speed, which meant our enemies would now have to jog at a moderate pace to catch us.

The track curved as we continued to accelerate, our wheels squealing against the outer rail. The station disappeared behind a line of trees. On our left, the terrain opened up, revealing the majestic butts of African elephants who were picking through a pile of hay. Their zookeeper frowned as we trundled past. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey!"

I waved. "Morning!"

Then we were gone. The cars shook dangerously as we picked up steam. My teeth clattered. My bladder sloshed. Up ahead, almost hidden behind a screen of bamboo, a fork in the track was marked by a sign in Latin: BONUM EFFERCIO.

"There!" I yelled. "*The Good Stuff!* We need to turn left!"

Calypso squinted at the console. "How?"

"There should be a switch," I said. "Something that operates the turnout."

Then I saw it—not on our console, but ahead of us on the side of the tracks—an old-fashioned hand lever. There was no time to stop the train, no time to run ahead and turn the switch by hand.

"Calypso, hold this!" I tossed her the Tots and unslung my bow. I nocked an arrow.

Once, such a shot would've been child's play for me. Now it was nearly impossible: shooting from a moving train, aiming for a point where the focused impact of an arrow would have the maximum chance of triggering the switch.

I thought of my daughter Kayla back at Camp Half-Blood. I imagined her calm voice as she coached me through the frustrations of mortal archery. I remembered the other campers' encouragement the day on the beach when I'd made a shot that brought down the Colossus of Nero.

I fired. The arrow slammed into the lever and forced it backward. The point blades shifted. We lurched onto the spur line.

"Down!" Calypso yelled.

We crashed through bamboo and careened into a tunnel just wide enough for the train. Unfortunately, we were going much too fast. The choo-choo tilted sideways, throwing sparks off the wall. By the time we shot out the other side of the tunnel, we were completely off-balance.

The train groaned and tilted—a sensation I knew well from those times the sun chariot had to veer to avoid a launching space shuttle or a Chinese celestial dragon. (Those things are *annoying*.)

"Out!" I tackled Calypso—yes, *again*—and leaped from the right side of the train as the line of cars spilled to the left, toppling off the tracks with a sound like a bronze-clad army being crushed by a giant fist. (I may have crushed a few armies that way back in the old days.)

The next thing I knew I was on all fours, my ear pressed against the ground

as if listening for a herd of buffalo, though I had no idea why.

"Apollo." Calypso tugged at the sleeve of my coat. "Get up."

My throbbing head felt several times larger than usual, but I didn't seem to have broken any bones. Calypso's hair had come loose around her shoulders. Her silver parka was dusted with sand and bits of gravel. Otherwise she looked intact. Perhaps our formerly divine constitutions had saved us from damage. Either that or we were just lucky.

We had crashed in the middle of a circular arena. The train lay curled sideways across the gravel like a dead caterpillar, a few feet shy of where the tracks ended. The perimeter was ringed with animal enclosures—Plexiglas walls framed in stone. Above that rose three tiers of stadium seating. Over the top of the amphitheater stretched a canopy of camouflage netting like I'd seen at the orangutan habitat—though here I suspected the netting was meant to keep winged monsters from flying away.

Around the arena floor, chains with empty manacles were fastened to spikes in the ground. Near these stood racks of sinister-looking tools: cattle prods, noose poles, whips, harpoons.

A cold lump formed in my throat. I would've thought I'd swallowed a griffin tater, except the packet was still miraculously intact in Calypso's arms. "This is a training facility," I said. "I've seen places like it before. These animals are being readied for the games."

"Readied?" Calypso scowled at the weapon racks. "How, exactly?"

"They're enraged," I said. "Baited. Starved. Trained to kill anything that moves."

"Savagery." Calypso turned to the nearest pen. "What have they done to those poor ostriches?"

Through the Plexiglas, four of the birds stared at us, their heads jerking sideways in a series of fits. They were strange-looking animals to begin with, but these had been outfitted with rows of iron-studded collars along their necks, spiked war helmets in the Kaiser Wilhelm style, and razor wire wreathed like Christmas lights around their legs. The nearest bird snapped at me, revealing jagged steel teeth that had been fitted inside his beak.

"The emperor's combat ostriches." I felt like a roof was collapsing inside my chest. The plight of these animals depressed me…but so did thinking about Commodus. The games he had engaged in as a young emperor were disagreeable to start with, and they had transformed into something much worse. "He used to enjoy using them for target practice. With a single arrow, he could decapitate a bird running at a full gallop. Once that wasn't entertaining enough…" I gestured at the enhanced war birds.

Calypso's face turned jaundice yellow. "*All* these animals will be killed?"

I was too dispirited to answer. I had flashbacks to the Flavian Amphitheater during Commodus's rule—the glistening red sand of the stadium floor littered with the carcasses of thousands of exotic animals, all butchered for sport and spectacle.

We moved to the next enclosure. A large red bull paced restlessly, his horns and hooves gleaming bronze.

"That's an Aethiopian Bull," I said. "Their hides are impervious to all metal weapons—like the Nemean Lion, except, ah…much larger, and red."

Calypso drifted past several more cells—some Arabian winged serpents, a horse that I judged to be of the carnivorous, fire-breathing variety. (I once thought about using those for my sun chariot, but they were *so* high maintenance.)

The sorceress froze at the next window. "Apollo, over here."

Behind the glass were two griffins.

Emmie and Josephine had been correct. They were magnificent specimens.

Over the centuries, with their natural habitats shrinking, wild griffins had become scrawny creatures, smaller and scrappier than in ancient times. (Much like the endangered three-eyed stoat or the giant gassy badger.) Few griffins had ever been large enough to support the weight of a human rider.

The male and female in front of us, however, truly were the size of lions. Their light brown fur gleamed like copper chain mail. Their russet wings folded regally across their backs. Their aquiline heads bristled with gold and white plumage. In the old days, a Grecian king would have paid a trireme full of rubies for a breeding pair like this.

Thankfully, I saw no sign that the animals had been abused. However, both were chained by their back legs. Griffins get *very* cantankerous when they're imprisoned or restrained in any way. As soon as the male, Abelard, saw us, he snapped and squawked, flapping his wings. He dug his claws in the sand and strained against his shackle, trying to reach us.

The female backed into the shadows, making a low gurgling noise like the growl of a threatened dog. She swayed from side to side, her belly low to the ground as if…

"Oh, no." I feared my weak mortal heart would burst. "No wonder Britomartis wanted these two back so badly."

Calypso seemed entranced by the animals. With some difficulty, she refocused on me. "What do you mean?"

"The female is *with egg*. She needs to nest immediately. If we don't get her back to the Waystation…"

Calypso's expression turned as sharp and steely as ostrich teeth. "Will Heloise be able to fly out of here?"

"I—I think so. My sister is more the expert on wild animals, but yes."

"Can a pregnant griffin carry a rider?"

"We don't have much choice except to try." I pointed at the netting above the arena. "That's the quickest way out, assuming we can unlock the griffins and remove the net. The problem is, Heloise and Abelard are *not* going to see us as friends. They're chained. They're caged. They're expecting a baby. They'll tear us apart if we get close."

Calypso crossed her arms. "What about music? Most animals like music."

I recalled the way I had used a song to mesmerize the *myrmekes* back at Camp Half-Blood. But I really didn't feel like singing about all my failures again, especially not in front of my companion.

I glanced back at the train tunnel. Still no sign of Lityerses or his men, but that didn't make me feel better. They should have been here by now….

"We need to hurry," I said.

The first problem was the easiest: the Plexiglas wall. I reasoned there must be a switch somewhere for lowering the partitions to release the various animals. I climbed into the spectator tiers with the help of a stepladder named Calypso, and found just such a control panel next to the arena's only padded seat—clearly for the emperor himself when he wanted to check on his killer beasts in training.

Each lever was conveniently labeled with masking tape and marker. One said GRIFFINS.

I called down to Calypso, "Are you ready?"

She stood directly in front of the griffin enclosure, hands out as if preparing to catch a projectile egg. "What would constitute *ready* in a situation like this?"

I flipped the switch. With a heavy *ka-chunk*, the griffins' Plexiglas screen dropped away, disappearing into a slot across the threshold.

I rejoined Calypso, who was humming some sort of lullaby. The two griffins were not impressed. Heloise growled loudly, pressing herself against the back wall of the enclosure. Abelard pulled at his chain twice as hard, trying to reach us and bite off our faces.

Calypso handed me the packet of Tots. She pointed with her chin into the enclosure.

"You must be kidding," I said. "If I get close enough to feed them, they'll eat *me*."

She stopped her song. "Aren't you the god of ranged weapons? Throw the Tots!"

I raised my eyes toward the netted-off heavens—which, by the way, I

considered a rude and completely unnecessary metaphor for my exile from Olympus. “Calypso, do you know nothing about these animals? To gain their trust, you must hand-feed them, putting your fingers inside the beak. This emphasizes that the food comes from you, as the mother bird.”

“Huh.” Calypso bit her lower lip. “I see the problem. You would make a terrible mother bird.”

Abelard lunged and squawked at me. Everyone was a critic.

Calypso nodded as if she’d come to a decision. “It’s going to take both of us. We’ll sing a duet. You have a decent voice.”

“I have a…” My mouth was paralyzed from shock. Telling *me*, the god of music, that I had a decent voice was like telling Shaquille O’Neal he played decent offense, or telling Annie Oakley she was a decent shot.

Then again, I was *not* Apollo. I was Lester Papadopoulos. Back at camp, despairing of my puny mortal abilities, I had sworn an oath on the River Styx not to use archery or music until I was once again a god. I had promptly broken that oath by singing to the myrmekes—for a good cause, mind you. Ever since, I had lived in terror, wondering when and how the spirit of the Styx would punish me. Perhaps, instead of a grand moment of retribution, it would be a slow death by a thousand insults. How often could a music god hear that he had a *decent voice* before he crumbled into a self-loathing pile of dust?

“Fine.” I sighed. “Which duet should we sing? ‘Islands in the Stream’?”

“Don’t know it.”

“‘I Got You, Babe’?”

“No.”

“Dear gods, I’m *sure* we covered the 1970s in your pop culture lessons.”

“What about that song Zeus used to sing?”

I blinked. “Zeus…singing?” I found the concept mildly horrifying. My father thundered. He punished. He scolded. He glowered like a champion. But he did not sing.

Calypso’s eyes got a little dreamy. “In the palace at Mount Othrys, when he was Kronos’s cupbearer, Zeus used to entertain the court with songs.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “I…hadn’t been born yet.”

I knew, of course, that Calypso was older than I, but I’d never really thought about what that meant. Back when the Titans ruled the cosmos, before the gods rebelled and Zeus became king, Calypso had no doubt been a carefree child, one of General Atlas’s brood, running around the palace harassing the aerial servants. Ye gods. Calypso was old enough to be my babysitter!

“Surely you know the song.” Calypso began to sing.

Electricity tingled at the base of my skull. I *did* know the song. An early

memory surfaced of Zeus and Leto singing this melody when Zeus visited Artemis and me as children on Delos. My father and mother, destined to be forever apart because Zeus was a married god—they had happily sung this duet. Tears welled in my eyes. I took the lower part of the harmony.

It was a song older than empires—about two lovers separated and longing to be together.

Calypso edged toward the griffins. I followed behind her—not because I was scared to lead, mind you. Everyone knows that when advancing into danger, the soprano goes first. They are your infantry, while the altos and tenors are your cavalry, and the bass your artillery. I've tried to explain this to Ares a million times, but he has *no* clue about vocal arrangement.

Abelard ceased yanking at his chain. He prowled and preened, making deep clucking sounds like a roosting chicken. Calypso's voice was plaintive and full of melancholy. I realized that she empathized with these beasts—caged and chained, yearning for the open sky. Perhaps, I thought, just *perhaps* Calypso's exile on Ogygia had been worse than my present predicament. At least I had friends to share my suffering. I felt guilty that I hadn't voted to release her earlier from her island, but why would she forgive me if I apologized now? That was all Styx water under the gates of Erebos. There was no going back.

Calypso put her hand on Abelard's head. He could easily have snapped off her arm, but he crouched and turned into the caress like a cat. Calypso knelt, removed another hairpin, and began working on the griffin's manacle.

While she tinkered, I tried to keep Abelard's eyes on me. I sang as decently as I could, channeling my sorrow and sympathy into the verses, hoping Abelard would understand that I was a fellow soul in pain.

Calypso popped the lock. With a clank, the iron cuff fell from Abelard's back leg. Calypso moved toward Heloise—a much trickier proposition, approaching an expecting mother. Heloise growled suspiciously but did not attack.

We continued to sing, our voices in perfect pitch now, melding together the way the best harmonies do—creating something greater than the sum of two individual voices.

Calypso freed Heloise. She stepped back and stood shoulder to shoulder with me as we finished the last line of the song: *As long as gods shall live, so long shall I love you.*

The griffins stared at us. They seemed more intrigued now than angry.

"Tots," Calypso advised.

I shook half the packet into her palms.

I didn't relish the idea of losing my arms. They were useful appendages. Nevertheless, I proffered a handful of golden Tater Tots to Abelard. He scuttled

forward and sniffed. When he opened his beak, I reached inside and pressed the Tots on his warm tongue. Like a true gentleman, he waited until I removed my hand before swallowing down the snack.

He ruffled his neck feathers, then turned to squawk at Heloise, *Yeah, good eatin'. Come on over!*

Calypso fed her Tots to Heloise. The female griffin butted her head against the sorceress in a sign of obvious affection.

For a moment, I felt relief. Elation. We had succeeded. Then behind us, someone clapped.

Standing at the threshold, bloody and battered but still very much alive, was Lityerses, all by himself.

"Well done," said the swordsman. "You found a perfect place to die."

16

Son of a Midas
You, sir, are a stupid-head
Here, have an ostrich

IN MY FOUR THOUSAND years of life, I had searched for many things—beautiful women, handsome men, the best composite bows, the perfect seaside palace, and a 1958 Gibson Flying V. But I had *never* searched for a perfect place to die.

"Calypso?" I said weakly.

"Yeah?"

"If we die here, I'd just like to say you aren't as bad as I originally thought."

"Thanks, but we're not going to die. That would deprive me of killing you later."

Lityerses chuckled. "Oh, you two. Bantering like you have a future. It must be hard for former immortals to accept that death is real. Me, I've died. Let me tell you, it's no fun."

I was tempted to sing to him the way I had with the griffins. Perhaps I could convince him I was a fellow sufferer. Something told me it wouldn't work. And alas, I was all out of Tater Tots.

"You're the son of King Midas," I said. "You came back to the mortal world when the Doors of Death were open?"

I didn't know much about that incident, but there'd been some massive Underworld jailbreak during the recent war with the giants. Hades had ranted nonstop about Gaea stealing all his dead people so they could work for her. Honestly, I couldn't blame the Earth Mother. Good cheap labor is *terribly* difficult to find.

The swordsman curled his lip. "We came through the Doors of Death, all right. Then my idiot father promptly got himself killed again, thanks to a run-in with Leo Valdez and his crew. I survived only because I was turned into a gold

statue and covered with a rug."

Calypso backed toward the griffins. "That's…quite a story."

"Doesn't matter," snarled the swordsman. "The Triumvirate offered me work. They recognized the worth of Lityerses, Reaper of Men!"

"Impressive title," I managed.

He raised his sword. "I earned it, believe me. My friends call me Lit, but my enemies call me Death!"

"I'll call you Lit," I decided. "Though you don't strike me as very *lit*. You know, your father and I used to be great friends. Once, I even gave him ass's ears."

As soon as I said that, I realized it was perhaps not the best proof of my friendship.

Lit gave me a cruel smile. "Yes, I grew up hearing about that music contest you made my dad judge. Gave him donkey ears because he declared your opponent the winner? Heh. My father hated you *so* much for that, I was almost tempted to like you. But I don't." He sliced through the air in a practice swipe. "It'll be a pleasure to kill you."

"Hold on!" I shrieked. "What about all that *take them alive* business?"

Lit shrugged. "I changed my mind. First, that roof collapsed on me. Then my bodyguards got swallowed by a stand of bamboo. I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

My pulse boomed like timpani in my ears. "No."

"Right." He regarded Calypso. "I think I'll keep *you* alive long enough to kill you in front of Valdez's face. That'll be fun. But this former god here…" Lit shrugged. "I'll just have to tell the emperor he resisted arrest."

This was it. After four millennia of glory, I was going to die in a griffin enclosure in Indianapolis. I confess I hadn't envisioned my death this way. I hadn't envisioned it at all, but if I *had* to go, I wanted a lot more explosions and blazing spotlights, a host of beautiful weeping gods and goddesses crying *No! Take us instead!*, and a lot less animal poop.

Surely Zeus would intercede. He couldn't allow my punishment on earth to include actual death! Or perhaps Artemis would slay Lit with an arrow of death. She could always tell Zeus it was a freak longbow malfunction. At the very least, I hoped the griffins would come to my aid, since I'd fed them and sung to them so sweetly.

None of that happened. Abelard hissed at Lityerses, but the griffin seemed reluctant to attack. Perhaps Lityerses had used those sinister training implements on him and his mate.

The swordsman rushed me with blinding speed. He swung his blade

horizontally—right toward my neck. My last thought was how much the cosmos would miss me. The last thing I smelled was the scent of baked apples.

Then, from somewhere above, a small humanoid form dropped between me and my attacker. With a clang and a burst of sparks, Lityerses's blade stopped cold in the crook of a golden *X*—the crossed blades of Meg McCaffrey.

I may have whimpered. I had never been so happy to see anyone in my life, and that *includes* Hyacinthus the time he wore that *amazing* tuxedo on our date night, so you know I mean it.

Meg pushed with her blades and sent Lityerses stumbling backward. Her dark pageboy hair was festooned with twigs and blades of grass. She wore her usual red high-tops, her yellow leggings, and the green dress Sally Jackson had lent her the first day we met. I found this strangely heartwarming.

Lityerses sneered at her, but he did not look particularly surprised. "I wondered if threatening this idiot god would smoke you out of hiding. You've signed your death warrant."

Meg uncrossed her blades. She retorted in her typical poetic fashion. "Nope."

Calypso glanced at me. She mouthed the question, *THIS is Meg?*

This is Meg, I agreed, which encompassed a lot of explanation in a very short exchange.

Lityerses stepped sideways to block the exit. He was limping slightly, probably from his incident with the canopy. "*You* dropped that ivy-covered roof on me," he said. "You made the bamboo attack my men."

"Yep," Meg said. "You're stupid."

Lit hissed in annoyance. I understood this effect Meg had on people. Still, my heart was humming a perfect middle C of happiness. My young protector had returned! (Yes, yes, she was technically my master, but let's not mince words.) She had seen the error of her ways. She had rebelled against Nero. Now she would stay by my side and help me retain my godhood. Cosmic order had been restored!

Then she glanced back at me. Instead of beaming with joy, or hugging me, or apologizing, she said, "Get out of here."

The command jarred me to the bones. I stepped back as if pushed. I was filled with the sudden desire to flee. When we'd parted, Meg had told me I was released from her service. Now it was clear that our master-servant relationship could not be so easily broken. Zeus meant me to follow her commands until I died or became a god again. I wasn't sure he cared which.

"But, Meg," I pleaded. "You just arrived. We must—"

"Go," she said. "Take the griffins and get out. I'll hold off stupid-head."

Lit laughed. "I've heard you're a decent sword fighter, McCaffrey, but no

child can match the Reaper of Men."

He spun his blade like Pete Townshend windmilling his guitar (a move I taught Pete, though I never approved of the way he smashed his guitar into the speakers afterward—such a waste!).

"Demeter is *my* mother, too," Lit said. "Her children make the best swordsmen. We understand the need to reap. It's just the flipside of sowing, isn't it, little sister? Let's see what you know about reaping lives!"

He lunged. Meg countered his strike and drove him back. They circled each other, three swords whirling in a deadly dance like blender blades making an air smoothie.

Meanwhile, I was compelled to walk toward the griffins as Meg had ordered. I tried to do it slowly. I was reluctant to take my eyes off the battle, as if merely by watching Meg, I was somehow lending her strength. Once, when I was a god, that would've been possible, but now, what good could a spectating Lester do?

Calypso stood in front of Heloise, protecting the mother-to-be with her body.

I made it to Calypso's side. "You're lighter than I," I said. "You ride Heloise. Be careful of her gut. I'll take Abelard."

"What about Meg?" Calypso demanded. "We can't leave her."

Just yesterday, I had toyed with the idea of leaving Calypso behind to the blemmyae when she was wounded. I'd like to say that wasn't a serious thought, but it had been, however briefly. Now Calypso refused to leave Meg, whom she barely knew. It was almost enough to make me question whether I was a good person. (I stress the word *almost*.)

"You're right, of course." I glanced across the arena. In the opposite enclosure, the combat ostriches were peering through their Plexiglas, following the sword fight with professional interest. "We need to move this party."

I turned to address Abelard. "I apologize in advance. I'm terrible at riding griffins."

The griffin squawked as if to say, *Do what you gotta do, man.* He allowed me to climb aboard and tuck my legs behind the base of his wings.

Calypso followed my example, carefully straddling Heloise's spine.

The griffins, impatient to be gone, bounded past the sword fight and into the arena. Lityerses lunged as I passed him. He would have taken off my right arm, but Meg blocked his strike with one sword and swept at Lit's feet with the other, forcing him back again.

"Take those griffins and you'll only suffer more!" Lit warned. "All the emperor's prisoners will die slowly, especially the little girl."

My hands shook with anger, but I managed to nock an arrow in my bow. "Meg," I yelled, "come on!"

“I told you to leave!” she complained. “You’re a bad slave.”

On that, at least, we agreed.

Lityerses advanced on Meg again, slashing and stabbing. I was no expert on swordplay, but as good as Meg was, I feared she was outmatched. Lityerses had more strength, speed, and reach. He was twice Meg’s size. He’d been practicing for countless more years. If Lityerses hadn’t recently been injured from having a roof dropped on him, I suspected this fight might have been over already.

“Go on, Apollo!” Lit taunted. “Fire that arrow at me.”

I had seen how fast he could move. No doubt he would pull an Athena and slash my arrow out of the sky before it hit him. So unfair! But shooting at him had never been my plan.

I leaned toward Abelard’s head and said, “Fly!”

The griffin launched himself into the air as if my added weight was nothing. He circled around the stadium tiers, screeching for his mate to join him.

Heloise had more trouble. She lumbered halfway across the arena floor, flapping her wings and growling with discomfort before getting airborne. With Calypso clinging to her neck for dear life, Heloise began flying in a tight circle behind Abelard. There was nowhere for us to go—not with the net above us—but I had more immediate problems.

Meg stumbled, barely managing to parry Lit’s strike. His next cut sliced across Meg’s thigh, ripping her legging. The yellow fabric quickly turned orange from the flow of blood.

Lit grinned. “You’re good, little sister, but you’re getting tired. You don’t have the stamina to face me.”

“Abelard,” I murmured, “we need to get the girl. Dive!”

The griffin complied with a bit too much enthusiasm. I almost missed my shot. I let my arrow fly not at Lityerses, but at the control box next to the emperor’s seat, aiming for a lever I had noted earlier: the one that read OMNIA —*everything*.

WHANG! The arrow hit its mark. With a series of satisfying *ka-chunks*, the Plexiglas shields dropped from all the enclosures.

Lityerses was too busy to realize what had happened. Being dive-bombed by a griffin tends to focus one’s attention. Lit backed away, allowing Abelard to snatch Meg McCaffrey in his paws and soar upward again.

Lit gaped at us in dismay. “Good trick, Apollo. But where will you go? You’re—”

That’s when he was run over by a herd of armored ostriches. The swordsman disappeared under a tidal wave of feathers, razor wire, and warty pink legs.

As Lityerses squawked like a goose, curling up to protect himself, the

winged serpents, fire-breathing horses, and Aethiopian Bull came out to join the fun.

"Meg!" I stretched out my arm. While precariously gripped in Abelard's paws, she willed her swords to shrink back into golden rings. She caught my hand. Somehow I managed to pull her onto Abelard and seat her in front of me.

The flying serpents fluttered toward Heloise, who squawked defiantly and beat her mighty wings, climbing toward the netting. Abelard followed.

My heart hammered against my ribs. Surely we couldn't bust through the net. It would be designed to withstand brute force, beaks, and claws. I imagined us hitting the barrier and getting bounced back to the arena floor as if on a reverse trampoline. It seemed an undignified way to die.

A moment before we would have slammed into the net, Calypso thrust up her arms. She howled in rage and the net blasted upward, ripped from its moorings, and was tossed into the sky like a giant tissue in a gale-force wind.

Free and unhurt, we soared out of the arena. I stared at Calypso in amazement. She seemed as surprised as I was. Then she slumped and listed sideways. Heloise compensated, shifting her pitch to keep the sorceress on board. Calypso, looking only semiconscious, clung weakly to the griffin's fur.

As our two noble steeds rose into the sky, I glanced down at the arena. The monsters were engaged in a vicious free-for-all, but I saw no sign of Lityerses.

Meg twisted to face me, her mouth set in a ferocious scowl. "You were *supposed* to go!"

Then she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me so tightly I felt new fracture lines developing on my ribs. Meg sobbed, her face buried in my shirt, her whole body shaking.

As for me, I did not weep. No, I'm sure my eyes were quite dry. I did not bawl like a baby in the slightest. The most I will admit is this: with her tears moistening my shirt, her cat-eye glasses digging uncomfortably into my chest, her smell of baked apples, dirt, and sweat overwhelming my nostrils, I was quite content to be annoyed, once again, by Meg McCaffrey.

17

To the Waystation
Meg McCaffrey eats my bread
I cry godly tears

HELOISE AND ABELARD knew where to go. They circled the Waystation roof until a section of shingles slid open, allowing the griffins to spiral into the great hall.

They landed on the ledge, side by side in their nest, as Josephine and Leo scrambled up the ladders to join us.

Josephine threw her arms first around Heloise's neck, then Abelard's. "Oh, my sweethearts! You're alive!"

The griffins cooed and leaned against her in greeting.

Josephine beamed at Meg McCaffrey. "Welcome! I'm Jo."

Meg blinked, apparently not used to such an enthusiastic greeting.

Calypso half climbed, half tumbled from Heloise's back. She would have toppled off the ledge if Leo hadn't caught her.

"Whoa, *mamacita*," he said. "You okay?"

She blinked sleepily. "I'm fine. Don't fuss. And don't call me—"

She crumpled against Leo, who struggled to keep her upright.

He glared at me. "What did you do to her?"

"Not a thing!" I protested. "I believe Calypso managed some magic."

I explained what had happened at the zoo: our encounter with Lityerses, our escape, and how the arena's netting had suddenly shot into the sky like a squid from a water cannon (one of Poseidon's less successful prototype weapons).

Meg added unhelpfully, "It was crazy."

"Lityerses," Leo muttered. "I *hate* that guy. Is Cal going to be okay?"

Josephine checked Calypso's pulse, then pressed a hand against her forehead. Slumped against Leo's shoulder, the sorceress snored like a razorback sow.

"She's blown a circuit," Josephine announced.

“Blown a circuit?” Leo yelped. “I don’t like blown circuits!”

“Just an expression, bud,” said Josephine. “She’s overextended herself magically. We should get her to Emmie in the infirmary. Here.”

Josephine scooped up Calypso. Ignoring the ladder, she jumped off the ledge and landed easily on the floor twenty feet below.

Leo scowled. “I could have done that.”

He turned to Meg. No doubt he recognized her from my many tales of woe. After all, young girls in stoplight-colored clothing and rhinestone cat-eye glasses were not common.

“You’re Meg McCaffrey,” he decided.

“Yep.”

“Cool. I’m Leo. And, uh…” He pointed at me. “I understand you can, like, control this guy?”

I cleared my throat. “We merely *cooperate*! I’m not controlled by anyone. Right, Meg?”

“Slap yourself,” Meg commanded.

I slapped myself.

Leo grinned. “Oh, this is too good. I’m going to check on Calypso, but later we need to talk.” He slid down the ladder railings, leaving me with a deep sense of foreboding.

The griffins settled into their nest, clucking contentedly to each other. I was no griffin midwife, but Heloise, thank the gods, seemed no worse for wear after her flight.

I faced Meg. My cheek stung where I’d slapped myself. My pride had been trampled like Lityerses under a herd of combat ostriches. Nevertheless, I felt remarkably happy to see my young friend.

“You rescued me.” Then I added two words that never come easily to a god: “Thank you.”

Meg gripped her elbows. On her middle fingers, her gold rings glinted with the crescent symbol of her mother, Demeter. I had bandaged her cut thigh as best I could while we were in flight, but she still looked shaky on her feet.

I thought she might cry again, but when she met my eyes, she wore her usual willful expression, as if she were about to call me Poop Face, or order me to play princess versus dragon with her. (I *never* got to be the princess.)

“I didn’t do it for you,” she said.

I tried to process that meaningless phrase. “Then why—”

“That guy.” She waved her fingers over her face, indicating Lityerses’s scars. “He was bad.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that.”

“And the ones who drove me from New York.” She made her *icky* expression. “Marcus. Vortigern. They said things, what they would do in Indianapolis.” She shook her head. “Bad things.”

I wondered if Meg knew that Marcus and Vortigern had been beheaded for letting her escape. I decided not to mention it. If Meg was really curious, she could check their Facebook status updates.

Next to us, the griffins snuggled in for a well-deserved rest. They tucked their heads under their wings and purred, which would have been cute if they didn’t sound like chainsaws.

“Meg…” I faltered.

I felt as if a Plexiglas wall divided us, though I wasn’t sure whom it was protecting from whom. I wanted to say so many things to her, but I wasn’t sure how.

I summoned my courage. “I am going to try.”

Meg studied me warily. “Try what?”

“To tell you…how I feel. To clear the air. Stop me if I say something wrong, but I think it’s obvious we still need each other.”

She didn’t respond.

“I don’t blame you for anything,” I continued. “The fact that you left me alone in the Grove of Dodona, that you lied about your stepfather—”

“Stop.”

I waited for her faithful servant Peaches the karpos to fall from the heavens and tear my scalp off. It didn’t happen.

“What I mean,” I tried again, “is that I am sorry for everything you have been through. None of it was your fault. You should not blame yourself. That fiend Nero played with your emotions, twisted your thoughts—”

“Stop.”

“Perhaps I could put my feelings into a song.”

“Stop.”

“Or I could tell you a story about a similar thing that once happened to me.”

“Stop.”

“A short riff on my ukulele?”

“Stop.” This time, though, I detected the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of Meg’s mouth.

“Can we at least agree to work together?” I asked. “The emperor in this city is searching for us both. If we don’t stop him, he will do many more bad things.”

Meg raised her left shoulder to her ear. “Okay.”

A gentle crackling sound came from the griffin’s nest. Green shoots were sprouting from the dry hay, perhaps a sign of Meg’s improving mood.

I remembered Cleander's words in my nightmare: *You should have realized how powerful she is becoming.* Meg had somehow tracked me to the zoo. She'd caused ivy to grow until it collapsed a roof. She'd made bamboo plants swallow a squad of Germani. She'd even teleported away from her escorts in Dayton using a clump of dandelions. Few children of Demeter had ever had such abilities.

Still, I was under no illusions that Meg and I could skip away from here arm in arm, our problems forgotten. Sooner or later, she would have to confront Nero again. Her loyalties would be tested, her fears played upon. I could not free her of her past, even with the best song or ukulele riff.

Meg rubbed her nose. "Is there any food?"

I hadn't realized how tense I'd been until I relaxed. If Meg was thinking of food, we were back on the path to normalcy.

"There is food." I lowered my voice. "Mind you, it's not as good as Sally Jackson's seven-layer dip, but Emmie's fresh-baked bread and homemade cheese are quite acceptable."

Behind me, a voice said drily, "So glad you approve."

I turned.

At the top of the ladder, Emmie was glaring griffin claws at me. "Lady Britomartis is downstairs. She wants to talk to you."

The goddess did not say thank you. She did not shower me with praise, offer me a kiss, or even give me a free magic net.

Britomartis simply waved to seats across the dinner table and said, "Sit."

She was dressed in a gauzy black dress over a fishnet bodysuit, a look that reminded me of Stevie Nicks, circa 1981. (We did a fabulous duet on "Stop Draggin' My Heart Around." I got *zero* credit on the album, though.) She propped her leather boots on the dining table as if she owned the place, which I guess she did, and twirled her auburn braid between her fingers.

I checked my seat, then Meg's, for any spring-activated explosive devices, but without Leo's expert eye, I couldn't be sure. My only hope: Britomartis looked distracted, perhaps *too* distracted for her usual fun and games. I sat. Happily, my gloutos did not explode.

A simple meal had been laid out: more salad, bread, and cheese. I hadn't realized it was lunchtime, but when I saw the food, my stomach growled. I reached for the loaf of bread. Emmie pulled it away and gave it to Meg.

Emmie smiled sweetly. "Apollo, I wouldn't want you to eat anything that's only *acceptable*. There's plenty of salad, though."

I stared miserably at the bowl of lettuce and cucumbers. Meg grabbed the entire bread loaf and ripped off a chunk, chewing it with gusto. Well…I say *chewing*. Meg stuffed so much into her mouth it was difficult to know if her teeth ever connected.

Britomartis laced her fingers in front of her. Even that simple gesture looked like an elaborate snare. “Emmie,” she said, “how is the sorceress?”

“Resting comfortably, my lady,” said Emmie. “Leo and Josephine are looking in on her—Ah, here they are now.”

Josephine and Leo strode toward the dining table, Leo’s arms spread like the Rio de Janeiro Christ statue. “You can all relax!” he announced. “Calypso is okay!”

The net goddess grunted as if disappointed.

A thought struck me. I frowned at Britomartis. “The net over the arena. Nets are *your* department. You helped blast it away, didn’t you? Calypso couldn’t have done that magic by herself.”

Britomartis smirked. “I may have jump-started her power a bit. She’ll be more useful to me if she can master her old abilities.”

Leo dropped his arms. “But you could’ve killed her!”

The goddess shrugged. “Probably not, but it’s hard to say. Tricky stuff, magic. You never know when or how it’s going to come out.” She spoke with distaste, as if magic were some poorly controlled bodily function.

Leo’s ears began to smoke. He stepped toward the goddess.

Josephine grabbed his arm. “Let it go, bud. Between Emmie and me, we can take care of your girl.”

Leo wagged a finger at Britomartis. “You’re lucky these ladies are such bosses. Jo here, she told me that with enough time and training she could probably help Calypso get her magic back all the way.”

Josephine shifted, her wrenches clinking in the pockets of her coveralls. “Leo—”

“Did you know she was a gangster?” He grinned at me. “Jo knew Al Capone! She had this secret identity and—”

“Leo!”

He flinched. “Which…isn’t my place to talk about. Oh, look, food.”

He took a seat and began cutting the cheese.

Britomartis pressed her hands against the table. “But enough about the sorceress. Apollo, I must admit you did moderately well retrieving my griffins.”

“Moderately well?” I bit back a few nasty comments. I wondered if demigods ever felt the need to restrain themselves when facing ungrateful gods like this. No. Surely not. I was special and different. And I deserved better

treatment.

"So glad you approve," I muttered.

Britomartis's smile was thin and cruel. I imagined nets wrapping around my feet, constricting the flow of blood in my ankles. "As promised, I will now reward you. I'll give you information that will lead you directly to the palace of the emperor, where you'll either make us proud…or be executed in some horrible but creative fashion."

18

My dear Commodus,
Commode is named after you
Hail, Toilet Caesar

WHY DID PEOPLE keep ruining my meals?

First they served me food. Then they explained how I was likely to die in the near future. I longed to be back on Mount Olympus, where I could worry about more interesting things, like hot trends in techno-pop, bumper-car poetry slams, and laying waste to naughty communities with my arrows of vengeance. One thing I'd learned from being mortal: contemplating death is *much* more fun when you're contemplating someone else's.

Before Britomartis would give us our "reward," she insisted on a briefing from Josephine and Emmie, who had spent all day, with Leo's help, preparing the Waystation for a siege.

"This guy's good." Josephine punched Leo's arm affectionately. "The things he knows about Archimedes spheres…*really* impressive."

"Spheres?" Meg asked.

"Yeah," Leo said. "They're these round things."

"Shut up." Meg went back to inhaling carbohydrates.

"We reset all the crossbow turrets," Jo continued. "Primed the catapults. Closed all exits and put Waystation on twenty-four-hour-surveillance mode. If anyone tries to get in, we'll know."

"They will try," Britomartis promised. "It's only a matter of time."

I raised my hand. "And, uh, Festus?"

I hoped the wistfulness in my voice was not too obvious. I didn't want the others to think I was ready to fly off on our bronze dragon and leave the Waystation to sort out its own problems. (Though I was ready to do exactly that.)

Emmie shook her head. "I scouted the statehouse grounds late last night, and again this morning. Nothing. The blemmyae must have taken your bronze

suitcase to the palace."

Leo clicked his tongue. "I bet Lityerses has it. When I get my hands on that crust-sucking Cornhusker—"

"Which brings us to the point," I said. "How does Leo—I mean, how do *we* find the palace?"

Britomartis slid her feet off the table. She sat forward. "The main gates to the emperor's palace are under the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument."

Josephine grunted. "Should've known."

"Why?" I asked. "What is that?"

Josephine rolled her eyes. "A *huge* decorated column thing in the middle of a plaza, a few blocks north of here. Just the kind of ostentatious, over-the-top edifice you'd expect the emperor to have for his entrance."

"It's the biggest monument in the city," Emmie added.

I tried to contain my bitterness. Soldiers and sailors were all very well, but if your city's biggest monument is not to Apollo, I'm sorry, you're doing something wrong. "I suppose the palace is heavily guarded?"

Britomartis laughed. "Even by my standards, the monument is a death trap. Machine gun turrets. Lasers. Monsters. Attempting the front door without an invitation would have dire consequences."

Meg swallowed a chunk of bread, somehow managing not to choke. "The emperor would let us in."

"Well, true," Britomartis agreed. "He'd love for you and Apollo to knock on his front door and give yourselves up. But I only mention the main entrance because you should *avoid* it at all costs. If you want to get inside the palace without being apprehended and tortured to death, there's another possibility."

Leo bit a cheese slice into the shape of a smile. He held it up to his mouth. "Leo is happy when he's not being tortured to death."

Meg snorted. A gob of bread shot out of her right nostril, but she didn't have the decency to look embarrassed. I could tell Leo and Meg were *not* going to be healthy influences on each other.

"Then, to get inside," said the goddess, "you must use the waterworks."

"The plumbing system," I guessed. "In my vision of the emperor's throne room, I saw open trenches of flowing water. You know how to access them?"

Britomartis winked at me. "You're not still afraid of water, I hope?"

"I have never been afraid of water!" My voice came out shriller than I intended.

"Hmm," Britomartis mused. "Then why did the Greeks always pray to you for a safe landing whenever they were in dangerous waters?"

"B-because my mother was stuck in a boat when she was trying to give birth

to me and Artemis! I can appreciate wanting to be on solid ground!"

"And those rumors you can't swim? I remember at Triton's pool party—"

"I can *totally* swim! Just because I didn't want to play Marco Polo with you in the deep end with contact mines—"

"Hey, goddy people," Meg interrupted. "The waterworks?"

"Right!" For once I was relieved at Meg's lack of patience. "Britomartis, how do we access the throne room?"

Britomartis narrowed her eyes at Meg. *"Goddy people?"* She seemed to be pondering how McCaffrey would look wrapped in a lead-weighted hook net and dropped into the Mariana Trench. "Well, Miss McCaffrey, to access the emperor's water system, you'll need to search the city's Canal Walk."

"What's that?" Meg asked.

Emmie patted her hand. "I can show you. It's an old canal that runs through downtown. They refurbished the area, built a bunch of new apartments and restaurants and whatnot."

Leo popped his cheese smile into his mouth. "I *love* whatnot."

Britomartis smiled. "That's fortunate, Leo Valdez. Because your skills will be required to find the entrance, disarm the traps, and whatnot."

"Hold up. *Find* the entrance? I thought you'd tell us where it was."

"I just did," said the goddess. "Somewhere along the canal. Look for a grate. You'll know it when you see it."

"Uh-huh. And it'll be booby-trapped."

"Of course! But not nearly as much as the fortress's main entrance. And Apollo will have to overcome his fear of water."

"I *don't* have a fear—"

"Shut up," Meg told me, causing my vocal cords to solidify like cold cement. She pointed a carrot at Leo. "If we find the grate, can you get us in?"

Leo's expression made him look as serious and dangerous as it was possible for a small elfin demigod to look in a little girl's coveralls (a clean pair, mind you, which he'd *intentionally* found and put on). "I'm a son of Hephaestus, *chica*. I can problem-solve. This guy Lityerses tried to kill me and my friends once before. Now he's threatened Calypso? Yeah, I'll get us inside that palace. Then I'm going to find Lit and…"

"Light him up?" I suggested, surprised but pleased to find I could speak again so soon after being told to shut up. "So he's literally lit?"

Leo frowned. "I wasn't going to say that. Seemed too corny."

"When I say it," I assured him, "it's poetry."

"Well." Britomartis rose, fishhooks and weights clinking in her dress. "When Apollo starts talking poetry, that's my cue to leave."

“I wish I’d known that sooner,” I said.

She blew me an air-kiss. “Your friend Calypso should remain here. Josephine, see if you can help her regain control over her magic. She’ll need it for the coming battle.”

Josephine drummed her fingers on the table. “Been a long time since I’ve trained anyone in the ways of Hecate, but I’ll do my best.”

“Emmie,” the goddess continued, “you watch after my griffins. Heloise could lay her egg at any moment.”

Emmie’s scalp turned crimson along her silver hairline. “What about Georgina? You’ve given us a way into the emperor’s palace. Now you expect us to stay here rather than go free our girl?”

Britomartis raised a hand in caution, as if to say, *You’re very close to the Burmese tiger pit, my dear.* “Trust Meg, Leo, and Apollo. This is their task: to find and free the captives, to retrieve the Throne of Mnemosyne—”

“And get Festus,” Leo added.

“And especially Georgina,” Jo added.

“We can pick up some groceries, too,” Leo offered. “I noticed you’re low on hot sauce.”

Britomartis chose not to destroy him, though from her expression I could tell she came close. “Tomorrow at first light, search for the entrance.”

“Why not earlier?” Meg asked.

The goddess smirked. “You’re fearless. I respect that. But you must be rested and prepared to meet the emperor’s forces. You need that leg wound tended to. I also suspect it’s been many nights since you’ve had a proper sleep. Besides, the incident at the zoo has the emperor’s security on high alert. Best to let the dust settle. If he catches you, Meg McCaffrey—”

“I know.” She did not sound afraid. Her tone was that of a child who’d been reminded for the fifth time to clean her room. The only sign of Meg’s anxiety: in her hand, her last piece of bread had begun to sprout green tendrils of wheat.

“In the meantime,” Britomartis said, “I will try to locate the Hunters of Artemis. They were in the area on a quest not long ago. Perhaps they are still close enough to come help defend this place.”

A hysterical giggle escaped my mouth. The idea of twenty or thirty other competent archers at my side, even if they were sworn maidens with no sense of humor, made me feel much safer. “That would be good.”

“But if not,” said the goddess, “you must be prepared to fight on your own.”

“That would be typical.” I sighed.

“And remember, the emperor’s naming ceremony is the day after tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much,” I said. “I needed the reminder.”

“Oh, don’t look so glum, Apollo!” Britomartis gave me one last flirtatious, irritatingly cute smile. “If you come out alive, we’ll catch a movie together. I promise.”

Her gauzy black dress swirled around her in a tornado of netting. Then she was gone.

Meg turned to me. “Naming ceremony?”

“Yes.” I stared at her furry green piece of bread, wondering if it was still edible. “The emperor is quite the megalomaniac. As he did in ancient times, he plans to rename this capital city after himself. Probably he’ll rename the state, the inhabitants, and the months of the year too.”

Meg snorted. “Commode City?”

Leo gave her a tentative smile. “What now?”

“His name is—”

“Don’t, Meg,” Josephine warned.

“—Commodus,” Meg continued, then frowned. “Why am I not supposed to say his name?”

“He pays attention to such things,” I explained. “There’s no point in letting him know we are talking about—”

Meg took a deep breath and yelled, “COMMODUS, COMMODUS, COMMODUS! COMMODE CITY, COMMODIANA. COMMODE DAY, MONTH OF COMMODES! COMMODE MAN!”

The great hall shook as if the Waystation itself had taken offense. Emmie blanched. Up in their roost, the griffins clucked nervously.

Josephine grumbled, “You shouldn’t have done that, hon.”

Leo just shrugged. “Well, if Commode Man wasn’t watching this channel before, I think he is now.”

“That’s dumb,” Meg said. “Don’t treat him like he’s so powerful. My stepfather—” Her voice caught. “He—he said Commodus is the weakest of the three. We can take him.”

Her words struck me in the gut like one of Artemis’s blunted arrows. (And I can assure you, those hurt.)

We can take him.

The name of my old friend, shouted over and over.

I staggered to my feet, gagging, my tongue trying to dislodge itself from my throat.

“Whoa, Apollo.” Leo rushed to my side. “You okay?”

“I—” Another dry retch. I staggered toward the nearest bathroom as a vision engulfed me…bringing me back to the day I committed murder.

19

Call me Narcissus
Today I'll be your trainer
I'll also kill you

I KNOW WHAT YOU are thinking. *But, Apollo! You are divine! You cannot commit murder. Any death you cause is the will of the gods and entirely beyond reproach. It would be an honor if you killed me!*

I like the way you think, good reader. It's true I had laid waste to whole cities with my fiery arrows. I had inflicted countless plagues upon humanity. Once Artemis and I slew a family of twelve because their mama said something bad about *our* mama. The nerve!

None of that did I consider murder.

But as I stumbled to the bathroom, ready to vomit into a toilet I had cleaned just yesterday, dreadful memories consumed me. I found myself in ancient Rome on a cold winter day when I truly *did* commit a terrible act.

A bitter wind swept through the palace halls. Fires guttered in the braziers. The faces of the praetorian guards betrayed no sign of discomfort, but as I passed them at every doorway, I could hear their armor clattering as they shivered.

No one challenged me as I strode toward the emperor's private chambers. Why would they? I was Narcissus, Caesar's trusted personal trainer.

Tonight I wore my mortal disguise poorly. My stomach churned. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. The shock of that day's games still overwhelmed my senses: the stench of carcasses on the arena floor; the bloodthirsty crowd shouting, "COMMODUS! COMMODUS!"; the emperor in resplendent golden armor and purple robes, tossing the severed heads of ostriches into the seats of the senators, gesturing toward the old men with the point of his sword: *You're next.*

The praetorian prefect Laetus had pulled me aside only an hour ago: *We*

failed at lunch. This is our last chance. We can take him, but only with your help.

Marcia, Commodus's mistress, had wept as she tugged at my arm. *He will kill us all. He will destroy Rome. You know what must be done!*

They were right. I'd seen the list of names—the enemies real or imagined whom Commodus intended to execute tomorrow. Marcia and Laetus were at the top of the list, followed by senators, noblemen, and several priests in the temple of Apollo Sosianus. That sort of thing I couldn't overlook. Commodus would chop them down as carelessly as he did his ostriches and lions.

I pushed open the bronze doors of the emperor's chambers.

From the shadows, Commodus bellowed, "GO AWAY!"

A bronze pitcher sailed past my head, slamming into the wall with such force it cracked the mosaic tiles.

"Hello to you, too," I said. "I never did like that fresco."

The emperor blinked, trying to focus. "Ah…it's you, Narcissus. Come in, then. Hurry! Bar the doors!"

I did as he asked.

Commodus knelt on the floor, clinging to the side of a sofa for support. In the opulence of the bedchamber with its silk curtains, gilded furniture, and colorfully frescoed walls, the emperor looked out of place—like a beggar pulled from some Suburra alley. His eyes were wild. His beard glistened with spittle. Vomit and blood spattered his plain white tunic, which wasn't surprising considering his mistress and prefect had poisoned his wine at lunch.

But if you could look *past* that, Commodus hadn't changed much since he was eighteen, lounging in his campaign tent in the Danubian Forest. He was thirty-one now, but the years had barely touched him. To the horror of Rome's fashionistas, he had grown his hair out long and had a shaggy beard to resemble his idol, Hercules. Otherwise he was the picture of manly Roman perfection. One might almost have thought he was an immortal god, as he so often claimed to be.

"They tried to kill me," he snarled. "I *know* it was them! I won't die. I'll show them all!"

My heart ached to see him this way. Only yesterday, I'd been so hopeful.

We'd practiced fighting techniques all afternoon. Strong and confident, he'd wrestled me to the ground and would have broken my neck if I'd been a regular mortal. After he let me up, we'd spent the rest of the day laughing and talking as we used to in the old days. Not that he knew my true identity, but still… disguised as Narcissus, I was sure I could restore the emperor's good humor, eventually rekindle the embers of the glorious young man I'd once known.

And yet this morning, he'd woken up more bloodthirsty and manic than ever.

I approached cautiously, as if he were a wounded animal. “You won’t die from the poison. You’re much too strong for that.”

“Exactly!” He pulled himself up on the couch, his knuckles white with effort. “I’ll feel better tomorrow, as soon as I behead those traitors!”

“Perhaps it would be better to rest for a few days,” I suggested. “Take some time to recuperate and reflect.”

“REFLECT?” He winced from the pain. “I don’t need to *reflect*, Narcissus. I will kill them and hire new advisors. You, perhaps? You want the job?”

I did not know whether to laugh or cry. While Commodus concentrated on his beloved games, he turned the powers of state over to prefects and cronies… all of whom tended to have a very short life expectancy.

“I’m just a personal trainer,” I said.

“Who cares? I will make you a nobleman! You will rule Commodiana!”

I flinched at the name. Outside the palace, no one accepted the emperor’s rechristening of Rome. The citizens refused to call themselves Commodians. The legions were furious that they were now known as Commodianae. Commodus’s crazy proclamations had been the final straw for his long-suffering advisors.

“Please, Caesar,” I implored him. “A rest from the executions and the games. Time to heal. Time to consider the consequences.”

He bared his teeth, his lips specked with blood. “Don’t *you* start too! You sound like my father. I’m done thinking about consequences!”

My spirits collapsed. I knew what would happen in the coming days. Commodus would survive the poisoning. He would order a ruthless purge of his enemies. The city would be decorated with heads on pikes. Crucifixions would line the Via Appia. My priests would die. Half the senate would perish. Rome itself, the bastion of the Olympian gods, would be shaken to its core. And Commodus would still be assassinated…just a few weeks or months later, in some other fashion.

I inclined my head in submission. “Of course, Caesar. May I draw you a bath?”

Commodus grunted assent. “I should get out of these filthy clothes.”

As I often did for him after our workout sessions, I filled his great marble bath with steaming rose-scented water. I helped him out of his soiled tunic and eased him into the tub. For a moment, he relaxed and closed his eyes.

I recalled how he looked sleeping beside me when we were teens. I remembered his easy laugh as we raced through the woods, and the way his face scrunched up adorably when I bounced grapes off his nose.

I sponged away the spittle and blood from his beard. I gently washed his

face. Then I closed my hands around his neck. “I’m sorry.”

I pushed his head underwater and began to squeeze.

Commodus was strong. Even in his weakened state, he thrashed and fought. I had to channel my godly might to keep him submerged, and in doing so, I must have revealed my true nature to him.

He went still, his blue eyes wide with surprise and betrayal. He could not speak, but he mouthed the words: *You. Blessed. Me.*

The accusation forced a sob from my throat. The day his father died, I had promised Commodus: *You will always have my blessings.* Now I was ending his reign. I was interfering in mortal affairs—not just to save lives, or to save Rome, but because I could not stand to see my beautiful Commodus die by anyone else’s hands.

His last breath bubbled through the whiskers of his beard. I hunched over him, crying, my hands around his throat, until the bathwater cooled.

Britomartis was wrong. I didn’t fear water. I simply couldn’t look at the surface of any pool without imagining Commodus’s face, stung with betrayal, staring up at me.

The vision faded. My stomach heaved. I found myself hunched over a different water basin—a toilet in the Waystation.

I’m not sure how long I knelt there, shivering, retching, wishing I could get rid of my hideous mortal frame as easily as I lost my stomach contents. Finally, I became aware of an orange reflection in the toilet water. Agamethus stood behind me, holding his Magic 8 Ball.

I whimpered in protest. “Must you sneak up on me while I’m vomiting?”

The headless ghost proffered his magic sphere.

“Some toilet paper would be more helpful,” I said.

Agamethus reached for the roll, but his ethereal fingers went right through the tissue. Odd that he could hold a Magic 8 Ball and not a roll of toilet paper. Perhaps our hosts had not sprung for the extra-soft two-ply ghost-friendly Charmin.

I took the ball. Without much conviction, I asked, “What do you want, Agamethus?”

The answer floated up through the dark liquid: WE CANNOT REMAIN.

I groaned. “Not another warning of doom. Who’s *we*? Remain where?”

I shook the ball once more. It provided the answer OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD.

I put the Magic 8 Ball back in Agamethus’s hands, which was like pressing against the wind from a moving vehicle. “I can’t play guessing games right now.”

He did not have a face, but his posture seemed forlorn. The blood from his

severed neck trickled sluggishly down his tunic. I imagined Trophonius's head transposed on his body—my son's agonized voice crying to the heavens, *Take me instead! Save him, Father, please!*

This blended with the face of Commodus, staring at me, wounded and betrayed as his carotid pulse hammered against my hands. *You. Blessed. Me.*

I sobbed and hugged the commode—the only thing in the universe that wasn't spinning. Was there *anyone* I hadn't betrayed and disappointed? Any relationship I hadn't destroyed?

After a miserable eternity in my private toilet-verse, a voice spoke behind me. "Hey."

I blinked away my tears. Agamethus was gone. In his place, leaning against the sink, was Josephine. She offered me a fresh roll of toilet paper.

I sniffled weakly. "Are you supposed to be in the men's room?"

She laughed. "Wouldn't be the first time, but our bathrooms are gender neutral here."

I wiped my face and clothes. I didn't accomplish much beyond toilet-papering myself.

Josephine helped me into a sitting position on the toilet. She assured me this was better than hugging it, though at the moment I saw little difference.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Not having any concerns about my dignity, I told her.

Josephine pulled a cloth from her coverall pocket. She wet it at the sink and began cleaning the sides of my face, getting the places I'd missed. She treated me as if I were her seven-year-old Georgie, or one of her mechanical crossbow turrets—something precious but high maintenance. "I'm not going to judge you, Sunny. I've done a few bad things in my time."

I studied her square-jawed face, the metallic sheen of her gray hair against her dark skin. She seemed so gentle and affable, the same way I thought of Festus the dragon, yet at times I had to step back and remember, *Oh, right, this is a giant fire-breathing death machine.*

"Leo mentioned gangsters," I recalled. "Al Capone?"

Josephine smirked. "Yep, Al. And Diamond Joe. And Papa Johnny. I knew 'em all. I was Al's—what would you call it?—liaison to the African American bootleggers."

Despite my dour mood, I couldn't help feeling a spark of fascination. The Jazz Age had been one of my favorites because…well, jazz. "For a woman in the 1920s, that's impressive."

"The thing is," Jo said, "they never knew I was a woman."

I had a sudden image of Josephine in black leather shoes with spats, a

pinstripe suit, a diamond-studded tie pin, and a black fedora, her submachine gun, Little Bertha, propped against her shoulder. “I see.”

“They called me Big Jo.” She gazed at the wall. Perhaps it was just my state of mind, but I imagined her as Commodus, throwing a pitcher so hard it cracked the tiles. “That lifestyle…it was intoxicating, dangerous. It took me to a dark place, almost destroyed me. Then Artemis found me and offered me a way out.”

I remembered Hemithea and her sister Parthenos launching themselves over a cliff, in a time when women’s lives were more expendable than jars of wine. “My sister has saved many young women from horrible situations.”

“Yes, she has.” Jo smiled wistfully. “And then Emmie saved my life again.”

“You two could still be immortal,” I grumbled. “You could have youth, power, eternal life—”

“We could,” Josephine agreed. “But then we wouldn’t have had the past few decades of growing old together. We’ve had a good life here. We’ve saved a lot of demigods and other outcasts—raised them at the Waystation, let them go to school and have a more or less normal childhood, then sent them out into the world as adults with the skills they needed to survive.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. There’s no comparison between that and immortality.”

Josephine shrugged. “It’s okay if you don’t get it. But I want you to know, Emmie didn’t give up your divine gift lightly. After sixty-odd years together with the Hunters, we discovered something. It’s not how long you live that matters. It’s what you live for.”

I frowned. That was a very ungodly way of thinking—as if you could have immortality *or* meaning, but not both.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked. “Are you trying to convince me that I should stay as…as this abomination?” I gestured at my pathetic mortal body.

“I’m not telling you what to do. But those folks out there—Leo, Calypso, Meg—they need you. They’re counting on you. Emmie and I are, too, to get our daughter back. You don’t have to be a god. Just do your best for your friends.”

“Ugh.”

Jo chuckled. “Once upon a time, that kind of talk would’ve made me throw up too. I thought friendship was a trap. Life was every woman for herself. But when I joined the Hunters, Lady Britomartis told me something. You know how she first became a goddess?”

I thought for a moment. “She was a young maiden, running to escape the king of Crete. To hide, she jumped in a fishing net in the harbor, didn’t she? Instead of drowning, she was transformed.”

“Right.” Jo intertwined her fingers like a cat’s cradle. “Nets can be traps. But

they can also be *safety* nets. You just have to know when to jump in."

I stared at her. I waited for a moment of revelation when everything would make sense and my spirits would be lifted.

"Sorry," I said at last. "I have no idea what that means."

"That's okay." She offered me a hand. "Let's get you out of here."

"Yes," I agreed. "I'd like a good long sleep before our trip tomorrow."

Jo grinned her affable killing machine smile. "Oh, no. No sleep yet. You've got afternoon chores, my friend."

20

Pedaling in style
Leg irons are fashionable
Cue the screaming god

AT LEAST I DIDN'T have to clean toilets.

I spent the afternoon in the griffin roost, playing music for Heloise to keep her calm while she laid her egg. She enjoyed Adele and Joni Mitchell, which strained my human vocal cords considerably, but she had no use for my impersonation of Elvis Presley. Griffin musical tastes are a mystery.

Once, I spotted Calypso and Leo down in the great hall, walking with Emmie, the three of them deep in conversation. Several times I saw Agamethus float through the hall, wringing his hands. I tried not to think about his Magic 8 Ball message: WE CANNOT REMAIN, which was neither cheerful nor helpful when one was trying to provide egg-laying mood music.

About an hour into my second set, Jo resumed the manufacture of her tracking device in the workshop, which necessitated me finding tunes that went well with the sound of a welding torch. Fortunately, Heloise enjoyed Patti Smith.

The only person I *didn't* see during the afternoon was Meg. I assumed she was on the roof, making the garden grow at five times its normal rate. Occasionally I glanced up, wondering when the roof might collapse and bury me in rutabagas.

By dinnertime, my fingers were blistered from playing my combat ukulele. My throat felt like Death Valley. However, Heloise was clucking contentedly on top of her newly laid egg.

I felt surprisingly better. Music and healing, after all, were not so different. I wondered if Jo had sent me to the roost for my own good as well as Heloise's. Those Waystation women were tricky.

That night I slept like the dead—the *actual* dead, not the restless, headless, glowing orange variety. By first light, armed with Emmie's directions to the

Canal Walk, Meg, Leo, and I were ready to navigate the streets of Indianapolis.

Before we left, Josephine pulled me aside. “Wish I was going with you, Sunny. I’ll do my best to train your friend Calypso this morning, see if she can regain control over her magic. While you’re gone, I’ll feel better if you wear this.”

She handed me an iron shackle.

I studied her face, but she did not seem to be joking. “This is a griffin manacle,” I said.

“No! I would never make a griffin wear a manacle.”

“Yet you’re giving *me* one. Don’t prisoners wear these for house arrest?”

“That’s not what it’s for. This is the tracking device I’ve been working on.”

She pressed a small indentation on the rim of the shackle. With a *click*, metallic wings extended from either side, buzzing at hummingbird frequency. The shackle almost leaped out of my hands.

“Oh, no,” I protested. “*Don’t* ask me to wear flying apparel. Hermes tricked me into wearing his shoes once. I took a nap in a hammock in Athens and woke up in Argentina. Never again.”

Jo switched off the wings. “You don’t have to fly. The idea was to make *two* ankle bracelets, but I didn’t have time. I was going to send them off to”—she paused, clearly trying to control her emotions—“to find Georgina and bring her home. Since I can’t do that, if you get in trouble, if you find her…” Jo pointed to a second indentation on the manacle. “This activates the homing beacon. It’ll tell me where you are, and you’d better believe we’ll send reinforcements.”

I didn’t know how Josephine would accomplish that. They didn’t have much of a cavalry. I also did not want to wear a tracking device on general principle. It went against the very nature of being Apollo. I should *always* be the most obvious, most brilliant source of light in the world. If you had to search for me, something was wrong.

Then again, Josephine was giving me that look my mother, Leto, always pulled when she was afraid I’d forgotten to write her a new song for Mother’s Day. (It’s kind of a tradition. And yes, I am a wonderful son, thanks.)

“Very well.” I fastened the shackle around my ankle. It fit snugly, but at least that way I could hide it under the hem of my jeans.

“Thank you.” Jo pressed her forehead against mine. “Don’t die.” Then she turned and marched purposefully back to her workshop, no doubt anxious to create more restraining devices for me.

Half an hour later, I discovered something important: one should never wear an

iron manacle while operating a pedal boat.

Our mode of transportation was Leo's idea. When we arrived at the banks of the canal, he discovered a boat-rental dock that was shut down for the season. He decided to liberate a teal plastic pedal boat, and insisted we call him the Dread Pirate Valdez. (Meg loved this. I refused.)

"This is the best way to spot that secret-entrance grate thing," he assured us as we pedaled along. "At water level, we can't miss it. Plus, we're traveling in style!"

We had very different ideas of traveling in style.

Leo and I sat in the front, operating the pedals. Under the iron manacle, my ankle felt like it was being slowly chewed off by a Doberman pinscher. My calves burned. I did not understand why mortals would pay money for this experience. If the boat were pulled by hippocampi, perhaps, but physical labor? Ugh.

Meanwhile, Meg faced the reverse direction in the backseat. She claimed she was "scouting our six" for the secret entrance to the sewers, but it looked an awful lot like she was relaxing.

"So what's with you and the emperor?" Leo asked me, his feet pedaling merrily along as if the exertion didn't bother him at all.

I wiped my brow. "I don't know what you mean."

"C'mon, man. At dinner, when Meg started shouting about commodes? You ran straight to the bathroom and spewed."

"I did not spew. It was more like *heaving*."

"Ever since, you've been awfully quiet."

He had a point. Being quiet was another un-Apollo-like trait. Usually I had so many interesting things to say and delightful songs to sing. I realized I should tell my companions about the emperor. They deserved to know what we were pedaling into. But forming the words was difficult.

"Commodus blames me for his death," I said.

"Why?" Meg asked.

"Probably because I killed him."

"Ah." Leo nodded sagely. "That would do it."

I managed to tell them the story. It wasn't easy. As I stared ahead of us, I imagined the body of Commodus floating just below the surface of the canal, ready to rise from the icy green depths and accuse me of treachery. *You. Blessed. Me.*

When I was done with the story, Leo and Meg remained silent. Neither of them screamed *Murderer!* Neither of them looked me in the eye, either.

"That's rough, man," Leo said at last. "But it sounds like Emperor Toilet

needed to go."

Meg made a sound like a cat's sneeze. "It's *Commodus*. He's handsome, by the way."

I glanced back. "You've met him?"

Meg shrugged. At some point since yesterday, a rhinestone had fallen out of her glasses' frames, like a star winked out of existence. It bothered me that I'd noticed such a small detail.

"Once," she said. "In New York. He visited my stepfather."

"Nero," I urged. "Call him Nero."

"Yeah." Red blotches appeared on her cheeks. "Commodus was handsome."

I rolled my eyes. "He's also vainglorious, puffed up, egotistical—"

"So he's like your competition, then?" Leo asked.

"Oh, shut up."

For a while, the only sound on the canal was the chugging of our pedal boat. It echoed off the ten-foot-high embankments and up the sides of brick warehouses that were in the process of conversion to condominiums and restaurants. The buildings' dark windows stared down at us, making me feel both claustrophobic and exposed.

"One thing I don't get," Leo said. "Why Commodus? I mean, if this Triumvirate is the three biggest and baddest emperors, the Roman supervillain dream team…Nero makes sense. But Commode Man? Why not some eviler, more famous guy, like Murderous Maximus or Attila the Hun?"

"Attila the Hun was not a Roman emperor," I said. "As for Murderous Maximus…well, that's actually a good name, but not a real emperor. As for why Commodus is part of the Triumvirate—"

"They think he's weak," Meg said.

She kept her gaze on our wake, as if she saw her own assortment of faces below the surface.

"You know this how?" I asked.

"My step—Nero told me. Him and the third one, the emperor in the west, they wanted Commodus between them."

"The third emperor," I said. "You know who he is?"

Meg frowned. "I only saw him once. Nero never used his name. He just called him *my kinsman*. I think even Nero is afraid of him."

"Fantastic," I muttered. Any emperor who scared Nero was not someone I wanted to meet.

"So Nero and the dude in the west," Leo said, "they want Commodus to be a buffer between them. Monkey in the middle."

Meg rubbed her nose. "Yeah. Nero told me….He said Commodus was like

his Peaches. A vicious pet. But controllable."

Her voice wavered on the name of her karpos companion.

I was afraid Meg might order me to slap myself or jump in the canal, but I asked, "Where *is* Peaches?"

She stuck out her lower lip. "The Beast—"

"Nero," I corrected gently.

"Nero took him. He said—he said I didn't deserve a pet until I behaved."

Anger made me pedal faster, made me almost welcome the chafing pain on my ankle. I didn't know how Nero had managed to imprison the grain spirit, but I understood why he'd done it. Nero wanted Meg to depend entirely on him. She wasn't allowed to have her own possessions, her own friends. Everything in her life had to be tainted with Nero's poison.

If he got his hands on me, no doubt he would use me the same way. Whatever horrible tortures he had planned for Lester Papadopoulos, they wouldn't be as bad as the way he tortured Meg. He would make her feel responsible for my pain and death.

"We'll get Peaches back," I promised her.

"Yeah, chica," Leo agreed. "The Dread Pirate Valdez never abandons a crew member. Don't you worry about—"

"Guys." Meg's voice took on a sharp edge. "What's that?"

She pointed to starboard. A line of chevrons rippled on the green water—like an arrow had been shot horizontally across the surface.

"Did you see what it was?" Leo asked.

Meg nodded. "A—a fin, maybe? Do canals have fish?"

I didn't know the answer, but I didn't like the size of those ripples. My throat felt as if it were sprouting fresh wheat shoots.

Leo pointed off the bow. "There."

Right in front of us, about half an inch below the surface, green scales undulated, then submerged.

"That's not a fish," I said, hating myself for being so perceptive. "I think that's another part of the same creature."

"As over there?" Meg pointed again to starboard. The two disturbances had happened at least forty feet apart. "That would mean something bigger than the boat."

Leo scanned the water. "Apollo, any idea what that thing is?"

"Only a hunch," I said. "Let's hope I'm wrong. Pedal faster. We have to find that grate."

21

Get me a legion
And about six tons of rocks
Need to kill a snake

I DO NOT LIKE SERPENTS.

Ever since my famous battle with Python, I've had a phobia of scaly reptilian creatures. (Especially if you include my stepmother, Hera. BOOM!) I could barely tolerate the snakes on Hermes's caduceus, George and Martha. They were friendly enough, but they *constantly* pestered me to write a song for them about the joy of eating rats—a joy I did not share.

I told myself the creature in the Central Canal wasn't an aquatic serpent. The water was much too cold. The canal didn't offer enough tasty fish to eat.

On the other hand, I knew Commodus. He loved to collect exotic monsters. I could think of one particular river serpent he would love—one that might easily sustain itself by eating tasty pedal-boaters….

Bad Apollo! I told myself. *Stay focused on your mission!*

We chugged along for another fifty feet or so, long enough for me to wonder if the threat had been imaginary. Perhaps the monster had been nothing more than an abandoned pet alligator. Did they have those in the Midwest? Very polite ones, perhaps?

Leo nudged me. "Look over there."

On the far embankment wall, peeking above the waterline, was the brick archway of an old sewer main, the entrance blocked by golden bars.

"How many sewers have you seen with gold grates on them?" Leo asked. "Betcha that one leads right to the emperor's palace."

I frowned. "That was much too easy."

"Hey." Meg poked me in the back of the neck. "Remember what Percy told us? Never say stuff like *We made it* or *That was easy*. You'll jinx us!"

"My entire existence is a jinx."

“Pedal faster.”

Since that was a direct order from Meg, I had no choice. My legs already felt like they were turning into sacks of hot coals, but I picked up the pace. Leo steered our teal plastic pirate ship toward the sewer entrance.

We were ten feet away when we triggered the First Law of Percy Jackson. Our jinx rose from the water in the form of a glistening arc of serpentine flesh.

I may have screamed. Leo shouted a completely unhelpful warning: “Look out!”

The boat tilted sideways. More arcs of serpent flesh breached around us—undulating hills of green and brown ridged with serrated dorsal fins. Meg’s twin blades flashed into existence. She tried to stand, but the pedal boat capsized, plunging us into a cold green explosion of bubbles and thrashing limbs.

My only consolation: the canal was not deep. My feet found the bottom and I was able to stand, gasping and shivering, the water up to my shoulders. Nearby, a three-foot-diameter coil of serpent flesh encircled our pedal boat and squeezed. The hull imploded, shattering teal plastic with a sound like firecrackers. One shard stung my face, narrowly missing my left eye.

Leo popped to the surface, his chin barely at water level. He waded toward the sewer grate, climbing over a hill of serpent flesh that got in his way. Meg, bless her heroic heart, slashed away at the monster’s coils, but her blades just skidded off its slimy hide.

Then the creature’s head rose from the canal, and I lost all hope that we would be home in time for tofu enchilada night.

The monster’s triangular forehead was wide enough to provide parking for a compact car. Its eyes glowed as orange as Agamethus’s ghost. When it opened its vast red maw, I remembered another reason I hate serpents. Their breath smells worse than Hephaestus’s work shirts.

The creature snapped at Meg. Despite being neck-deep in water, she somehow sidestepped and thrust her left-handed blade straight into the serpent’s eye.

The monster threw its head back and hissed. The canal boiled with snake flesh. I was swept off my feet and submerged once more.

When I came to the surface, Meg McCaffrey stood at my side, her chest heaving as she gasped for air, her glasses crooked and filmed with canal water. The serpent’s head flailed from side to side as if trying to shake the blindness out of its wounded eye. Its jaw smacked against the nearest condominium building, shattering windows and webbing the brick wall with cracks. A banner along the roofline said LEASING SOON! I hoped that meant the building was empty.

Leo made it to the grate. He traced his fingers along the golden bars, perhaps

looking for buttons or switches or traps. Meg and I were now thirty feet away from him, which seemed a great distance over the vast serpentine terrain.

"Hurry!" I called to him.

"Gee, thanks!" he yelled back. "I didn't think of that."

The canal churned as the serpent drew in its coils. Its head rose two stories above us. Its right eye had gone dark, but its glowing left iris and its hideous maw reminded me of those pumpkin things mortals make for Halloween—jack-o'-lanterns? A silly tradition. I always preferred running around in goatskins at Februalia. Much more dignified.

Meg stabbed at the creature's underbelly. Her golden blade only sparked against it.

"What *is* this thing?" she demanded.

"The Carthaginian Serpent," I said. "One of the most fearsome beasts ever to face Roman troops. In Africa, it almost drowned an entire legion under Marcus Atilius Regulus—"

"Don't care." Meg and the serpent eyed each other warily—as if a giant monster and a twelve-year-old girl were well-matched opponents. "How do I kill it?"

My mind raced. I didn't do well in panic situations, which meant most of the situations I had been in recently. "I—I think the legion finally crushed it with thousands of rocks."

"I don't have a legion," Meg said. "Or thousands of rocks."

The serpent hissed, spraying venom across the canal. I unslung my bow, but I ran into that pesky *maintenance* issue again. A wet bowstring and arrows were problematic, especially if I planned to hit a target as small as the serpent's other eye. Then there were the physics of firing a bow while shoulder-deep in water.

"Leo?" I called.

"Almost!" He banged a wrench against the grate. "Keep it distracted!"

I gulped. "Meg, perhaps if you could stab its other eye, or its mouth."

"While you do what, hide?"

I really hated how this young girl could get inside my brain. "Of course not! I'll just be, um—"

The serpent struck. Meg and I dove in opposite directions. The creature's head caused a tsunami between us, somersaulting me through the water. I swallowed a few gallons of the canal and came up spluttering, then gagged in horror when I saw Meg encircled in the snake's tail. The serpent lifted her out of the water, bringing her level with its remaining eye. Meg slashed wildly, but the monster kept her out of striking distance. It regarded her as if thinking, *What is this stoplight-colored thing?*

Then it began to squeeze.

Leo yelled, “I got it!”

Clang. The grate’s golden bars swung inward.

Leo turned, grinning in pride, then saw Meg’s predicament.

“Nuh-uh!” He raised his hand above the water and tried to summon fire. All he managed was a puff of steam. He threw a wrench that bounced harmlessly off the snake’s side.

Meg yelped. The snake’s tail constricted around her waist, turning her face tomato red. She hammered her swords uselessly against the monster’s hide.

I stood paralyzed, unable to help, unable to think.

I knew the strength of such a serpent. I remembered being wrapped in Python’s coils, my divine ribs cracking, my godly ichor being squeezed into my head and threatening to spurt out my ears.

“Meg!” I shouted. “Hold on!”

She glared down at me, her eyes bulging, her tongue swollen, as if thinking, *Like I have a choice?*

The serpent ignored me, no doubt too interested in watching Meg implode like the pedal boat. Behind the snake’s head rose the damaged brick wall of a condominium. The sewer entrance stood just to the right of that.

I remembered the tale of the Roman legion that had once fought this thing by showering it with stones. If only that brick wall were part of the Waystation, and I could command it….

The idea seized me like a coil of the monster.

“Leo!” I yelled. “Get in the tunnel!”

“But—”

“Do it!”

Something began to swell inside my chest. I hoped it was power and not my breakfast.

I filled my lungs and bellowed in the baritone voice I usually reserved for Italian operas: “BEGONE, SNAKE! I AM APOLLO!”

The frequency was perfect.

The wall of the warehouse trembled and cracked. A three-story-tall curtain of bricks peeled away and collapsed onto the serpent’s back, pushing its head underwater. Its coiled tail loosened. Meg dropped into the canal.

Ignoring the rain of bricks, I waded forward (quite bravely, I thought) and pulled Meg to the surface.

“Guys, hurry!” Leo yelled. “The grate’s closing again!”

I dragged Meg toward the sewer (because that’s what friends are for) as Leo did his best to wedge the grate open with a tire iron.

Thank goodness for scrawny mortal bodies! We squeezed through just as the bars locked into place behind us.

Outside, the serpent surged upward from its baptism of bricks. It hissed and banged its half-blind head against the grate, but we did not linger to chat. We forged on, into the darkness of the emperor’s waterworks.

22

I wax poetic
On the beauty of sewers
Real short poem. Done

WADING SHOULDER-DEEP through freezing sewer water, I felt nostalgic for the Indianapolis Zoo. Oh, for the simple pleasures of hiding from murderous Germani, crashing miniature trains, and serenading angry griffins!

Gradually, the sound of the serpent banging on the grate faded behind us. We walked for so long, I feared we'd die of hypothermia before reaching our goal. Then I spotted a raised alcove built into the side of the tunnel—an old service platform, maybe. We climbed out of the frigid green muck for a break. Meg and I huddled together while Leo attempted to light himself on fire.

On his third try, his skin sputtered and hissed, finally bursting into flames.

"Gather round, children." His grin looked diabolical with orange fire washing across his face. "Nothing like a blazing-hot Leo to warm you up!"

I tried to call him an idiot, but my jaw was shivering so badly, all that came out was, "Id—id—id—id—id—"

Soon our little alcove was infused with the smell of reheated Meg and Apollo—baked apples, mildew, body odor, and just a hint of awesomeness. (I'll let you guess which scent was *my* contribution.) My fingers turned from blue back to pink. I could feel my legs well enough again to be bothered by the chafing from the iron shackle. I was even able to speak without stuttering like Josephine's tommy gun.

When Leo judged us sufficiently dry, he shut off his personal bonfire. "Hey, Apollo, that was nice work back there."

"Which part?" I said. "The drowning? The screaming?"

"Nah, man—how you collapsed that brick wall. You should do that more often."

I plucked a teal plastic shard from my coat. "As an annoying demigod once

told me, *Gee, why didn't I think of that?* I've explained before—I can't control those bursts of power. Somehow, in that moment, I found my godly voice. Brick mortar resonates at a certain frequency. It's best manipulated by a baritone at one hundred twenty-five decibels—"

"You saved me," Meg interrupted. "I was going to die. Maybe that's why you got your voice back."

I was reluctant to admit it, but she might have been right. The last time I'd experienced a burst of godly power, in the woods of Camp Half-Blood, my children Kayla and Austin had been in imminent danger of burning alive. Concern for others was a logical trigger for my powers. I was, after all, selfless, caring, and an all-around nice guy. Nevertheless, I found it irritating that my *own* well-being wasn't sufficient to give me godly strength. My life was important too!

"Well," I said, "I'm glad you weren't crushed to death, Meg. Anything broken?"

She touched her rib cage. "Nah. I'm good."

Her stiff movement, her pale complexion, and the tightness around her eyes told me otherwise. She was in more pain than she would admit. However, until we got back to the Waystation infirmary, I couldn't do much for her. Even if I'd had proper medical supplies, wrapping the ribs of a girl who'd almost been crushed to death might do more harm than good.

Leo stared at the dark green water. He looked more pensive than usual, or perhaps it was just the fact that he wasn't on fire anymore.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

He glanced over—no snappy comeback, no playful grin. "Just…Leo and Calypso's Garage: Auto Repair and Mechanical Monsters."

"What?"

"Something Cal and I used to joke about."

It didn't sound like a very funny joke. Then again, mortal humor wasn't always up to my godly standards. I recalled Calypso and Leo deep in conversation with Emmie yesterday as they walked through the great hall.

"Something to do with what Emmie was telling you?" I ventured.

He shrugged. "Stuff for the future. Nothing to worry about."

As a former god of prophecy, I'd always found the future a wonderful source of worry. But I decided not to press the issue. Right now, the only future goal that mattered was getting me back to Mount Olympus so the world could once again bask in my divine glory. I had to think of the greater good.

"Well," I said, "now that we're warm and dry, I suppose it's time to get in the water again."

“Fun,” Meg said. She jumped in first.

Leo led the way, keeping one burning hand above the water for light. Every so often, small objects floated up from the pockets of his tool belt and drifted past me—Velcro tabs, Styrofoam peanuts, multicolored twist ties.

Meg guarded our backs, her twin swords gleaming in the darkness. I appreciated her fighting skills, but I *did* wish we had some additional help. A demigod child of the sewer goddess Cloacina would have been welcome…which is the first time I’d ever had *that* depressing thought.

I trudged along in the middle, trying to avoid flashbacks of my long-ago, unintended trip through a sewage-treatment facility in Biloxi, Mississippi. (That day would’ve been a total disaster, except that it ended with an impromptu jam session with Lead Belly.)

The current became stronger, pushing against us. Up ahead, I detected the glow of electric lights, the sound of voices. Leo extinguished his hand fire. He turned to us and put his finger to his lips.

After another twenty feet, we arrived at a second set of golden bars. Beyond that, the sewer opened into a much larger space where the water ran at a crosscurrent, some of it diverting into our tunnel. The force of the outflow made it difficult to stand.

Leo pointed at the golden grate. “This runs on a clepsydra lock,” he said just loud enough to be heard. “I think I can open it quietly, but keep watch for me just in case…I don’t know…giant serpents.”

“We have faith in you, Valdez.” I had no idea what a clepsydra lock was, but I’d learned from dealing with Hephaestus that it was best to show optimism and polite interest. Otherwise the tinkerer took offense and stopped making shiny toys for me to play with.

Within moments, Leo had the grate open. No alarms sounded. No contact mines exploded in our faces.

We emerged in the throne room I’d seen in my vision.

Fortunately, we were neck-deep in one of the open channels of water that lined the sides of the chamber, so I doubted anyone could easily spot us. Along the wall behind us, videos of Commodus looped over and over on the giant television screens.

We trudged toward the opposite side of the channel.

If you have ever tried to walk while immersed in a swift stream, you know how difficult it is. Also, if you have tried it, then may I ask *why*? It was absolutely exhausting. With every step, I feared the current would sweep me off my feet and flush me into the bowels of Indianapolis. Somehow, though, we made it to the far side.

I peeked over the edge of the channel and was immediately sorry I did.

Commodus was *right there*. Thank the gods, we had crossed slightly *behind* his throne, so neither he nor his Germani guards saw me. My least favorite Cornhusker, Lityerses, knelt before the emperor, facing my direction, but his head was lowered. I ducked back below the edge before he could spot me. I gestured to my friends: *Quiet. Yikes. We're going to die.* Or something to that effect. They seemed to get the message. Shivering miserably, I pressed against the wall and listened to the conversation going on just above us.

"—part of the plan, sire," Lityerses was saying. "We know where the Waystation is now."

Commodus grunted. "Yes, yes. Old Union Station. But Cleander searched that place several times before and found nothing."

"The Waystation is there," Lityerses insisted. "The tracking devices I planted on the griffins worked perfectly. The place must be protected by some sort of magic, but it won't stand up to a fleet of blemmyae bulldozers."

My heart climbed above water level, which put it somewhere between my ears. I dared not look at my friends. I had failed once again. I had unwittingly betrayed the location of our safe haven.

Commodus sighed. "Fine. Yes. But I want Apollo captured and brought to me in chains! The naming ceremony is tomorrow. Our dress rehearsal is, like, *right now*. When can you have the Waystation destroyed?"

Lityerses hesitated. "We need to scout the defenses. And gather our forces. Two days?"

"TWO DAYS? I'm not asking you to cross the Alps! I want it to happen *now*!"

"Tomorrow, then, at the latest, sire," said Lityerses. "Definitely by tomorrow."

"Hmph. I'm beginning to wonder about you, son of Midas. If you don't deliver—"

An electronic alarm blared through the chamber. For a moment, I thought we'd been discovered. I may or may not have emptied my bladder in the channel. (Don't tell Leo. He was downstream.)

Then, from the other side of the room, a voice shouted in Latin, "Incursion at the front gates!"

Lityerses growled. "I will deal with this, sire. Never fear. Guards, with me!"

Heavy footsteps faded into the distance.

I glanced at Meg and Leo, who were both giving me the same silent question: *What the Hades?*

I had not ordered an incursion at the front gates. I hadn't even activated the

iron manacle on my ankle. I didn't know who would be so foolish as to launch a frontal assault on this underground palace, but Britomartis *had* promised to look for the Hunters of Artemis. It occurred to me that this was the sort of diversionary tactic they might arrange if they were trying to distract Commodus's security forces from our presence. Could we be so lucky? Probably not. More likely, some magazine-subscription salesman had rung the emperor's doorbell and was about to get a very hostile reception.

I risked another peek over the edge of the canal. Commodus was alone now with just one guard.

Perhaps we could take him—three on two?

Except that we were all about to pass out from hypothermia, Meg probably had some broken ribs, and my own powers were unpredictable at best. On the opposing team, we had a trained barbarian killer and a semi-divine emperor with a well-deserved reputation for superhuman strength. I decided to stay put.

Commodus glanced at his bodyguard. "Alaric."

"Lord?"

"I think your time is approaching. I grow impatient with my prefect. How long has Lityerses had this job?"

"About a day, my lord."

"Seems like forever!" Commodus pounded his fist on his armrest. "As soon as he's dealt with this incursion, I want you to kill him."

"Yes, lord."

"I want you to wipe out the Waystation *tomorrow morning* at the *latest*. Can you do that?"

"Of course, lord."

"Good! We'll have the naming ceremony immediately afterward in the colosseum."

"Stadium, my lord."

"Same difference! And the Cave of Prophecy? Is it secure?"

My spine took a jolt of electricity so strong I wondered if Commodus kept electric eels in the channel.

"I have followed your orders, sire," Alaric said. "The beasts are in place. The entrance is well guarded. None shall gain access."

"Lovely!" Commodus jumped to his feet. "Now let's go try on our racing outfits for the dress rehearsal, shall we? I can't wait to remake this city in my own image!"

I waited until the sound of their footsteps receded. I peeked over and saw no one in the room.

"Now," I said.

We dragged ourselves out of the canal and stood dripping and shivering in front of the golden throne. I could still smell the scent of Commodus's favorite body oil—a mix of cardamom and cinnamon.

Meg paced for warmth, her swords glowing in her hands. "Tomorrow morning? We gotta warn Jo and Emmie."

"Yeah," Leo agreed. "But we stick to the plan. First we find the captives. And that Throne of Whatever-It-Is—"

"Memory," I said.

"Yeah, that. *Then* we get out of here and warn Jo and Emmie."

"It may not help," I fretted. "I've *seen* how Commodus remakes a city. There will be chaos and spectacle, fire and wholesale slaughter, and lots and *lots* of pictures of Commodus *everywhere*. Add to that an army of blemmyae bulldozers —"

"Apollo." Leo made a fiery *time-out* sign. "We're gonna use the Valdez method on this."

Meg frowned. "What's the Valdez method?"

"Don't overthink it," Leo said. "It'll just make you depressed. In fact, try not to think at all."

Meg considered this, then seemed to realize she was thinking, then looked sheepish. "'Kay."

Leo grinned. "See? Easy! Now let's go blow some stuff up."

23

So amaze! Such name!
Ssssarah with five s's is
Still two syllablesssssss

AT FIRST, the Valdez method worked fine.

We found nothing to blow up, but we also didn't have to overthink anything. This was because we embraced the McCaffrey method as well, which involved chia seeds.

Faced with a choice of which corridor to take from the throne room, Meg pulled a soggy package of seeds from her red high-top. (I did not ask why she kept seeds in her shoes.) She caused the chia to sprout in her cupped palm, and the tiny forest of green stalks pointed toward the left-hand corridor.

"That way," Meg announced.

"Awesome superpower," Leo said. "When we get out of here, I'ma hook you up with a mask and a cape. We'll call you Chia Girl."

I hoped he was kidding. Meg, however, looked delighted.

The chia sprouts led us down one corridor then another. For an underground lair in the Indianapolis sewer system, the palace was quite opulent. The floors were rough-hewn slate, the gray stone walls decorated with alternating tapestries and television monitors showing—you guessed it—videos of Commodus. Most of the mahogany doors were labeled with engraved bronze plates: COMMODUS SAUNA, COMMODUS GUEST ROOMS 1–6, COMMODUS EMPLOYEE CAFETERIA, and, yes, COMMODUS COMMODES.

We saw no guards, no employees, no guests. The only person we encountered was a maid coming out of the COMMODUS IMPERIAL GUARD BARRACKS with a basket of dirty laundry.

When she saw us, her eyes widened in terror. (Probably because we looked dirtier and damper than anything she'd pulled from the Germani's hamper.) Before she could scream, I knelt before her and sang "You Don't See Me" by

Josie and the Pussycats. The maid's eyes became misty and unfocused. She sniffled nostalgically, walked back into the barracks, and closed the door behind her.

Leo nodded. "Nice one, Apollo."

"It wasn't hard. That tune is wonderful for inducing short-term amnesia."

Meg sniffed. "Would've been kinder to hit her over the head."

"Oh, come now," I protested. "You *like* my singing."

Her ears reddened. I remembered how young McCaffrey had cried when I poured out my heart and soul in the giant ants' lair at Camp Half-Blood. I'd been rather proud of my performance, but I guess Meg did not feel like reliving it.

She punched me in the gut. "Come on."

"Ow."

The chia seeds led us deeper into the emperor's compound. Silence began to weigh on me. Imaginary insects crawled across my shoulder blades. Surely Commodus's men had dealt with the front-door incursion by now. They would be returning to their normal posts, perhaps checking security monitors for other intruders.

At last, we turned a corner and spotted a blemmyae keeping watch outside a metal vault door. The guard wore black dress pants and shiny black shoes, but he made no attempt to hide his chest-face. The hair across his shoulders/scalp was clipped in a military flattop. The wire of a security earpiece ran from beneath his armpit to his pants pocket. He did not appear to be armed, but that gave me no comfort. His meaty fists looked quite capable of crushing a pedal boat or a Lester Papadopoulos.

Leo grumbled under his breath, "Not these guys again." Then he forced a smile and strode toward the guard. "Hello! Lovely day! How are you?"

The guard turned in surprise. I imagined that proper procedure would have been to alert his superiors to the intrusion, but he'd been asked a question. It would've been rude to ignore it.

"I'm fine." The guard couldn't seem to decide between a friendly smile or an intimidating glower. His mouth spasmed, which made him look like he was doing an ab exercise. "I don't think you're supposed to be here."

"Really?" Leo kept marching forward. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome. Now if you'll please raise your hands."

"Like this?" Leo ignited his hands and torched the blemmyae's chest-face.

The guard stumbled, choking on flames, batting his huge eyelashes like burning palm fronds. He groped for the button on the microphone attached to his earpiece. "Post twelve," he croaked. "I've got—"

Meg's twin golden swords scissored across his midsection, reducing him to a

pile of yellow dust with a partially melted earpiece.

A voice warbled from the tiny speaker. “Post twelve, please repeat.”

I grabbed the device. I had *no* desire to wear something that had been in a blemmyae’s armpit, but I held the speaker next to my ear and spoke into the mic. “False alarm. Everything is hunky-dorky. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said the voice in the speaker. “Daily passcode, please.”

“Why, certainly! It’s—”

I threw the microphone down and crushed it under my heel.

Meg stared at me. “Hunky-*dorky*?”

“It sounded like something a blemmyae would say.”

“That’s not even the right expression. It’s hunky-*dory*.”

“A girl who says *goddy* is correcting my language.”

“Guys,” Leo said. “Keep a lookout while I take care of this door. There’s gotta be something important in here.”

I kept watch while he went to work on the vault lock. Meg, not being good at following directions, strolled back the way we’d come. She crouched and began picking up the chia sprouts she’d dropped when summoning her swords.

“Meg,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?”

“Chia.”

“I can see that, but…” I almost said, *They’re only sprouts.*

Then I remembered one time I’d said something similar to Demeter. The goddess had cursed me so that every piece of clothing I put on immediately sprouted and bloomed. Nothing is quite as uncomfortable as having your cotton underwear burst into actual bolls of cotton, complete with stems, spurs, and seeds right where your…Well, I think you get the idea.

Meg gathered the last of her sprouts. With one of her swords, she cracked the slate floor. She carefully planted the chia in the fissure, then wrung out her still-wet skirt to water them.

I watched, fascinated, as the small patch of green thickened and flourished, forcing new cracks in the slate. Who knew chia could be so robust?

“They wouldn’t last any longer in my hand.” Meg stood, her expression defiant. “Everything alive deserves a chance to grow.”

The mortal Lester part of me found this sentiment admirable. The Apollo part of me wasn’t so sure. Over the centuries, I’d met many living beings that hadn’t seemed worthy or even capable of growth. A few of those beings I’d killed myself….

Still, I suspected Meg was saying something about herself. She had endured

a horrid childhood—the death of her father, then the abuse of Nero, who'd twisted her mind into seeing him both as her kindly stepfather and the terrible Beast. Despite that, Meg had survived. I imagined she could empathize with small green things that had surprisingly strong roots.

"Yes!" Leo said. The vault lock clicked. The door swung inward. Leo turned and grinned. "Who's the best?"

"Me?" I asked, but my spirits quickly fell. "You didn't mean me, did you?"

Leo ignored me and stepped into the room.

I followed. Immediately, an intense, unpleasant moment of déjà vu struck me. Inside, a circular chamber was lined with glass partitions like the emperor's training facility at the zoo. But here, instead of animals, the cages held people.

I was so appalled I could hardly breathe.

In the nearest cell on my left, huddled in a corner, two painfully emaciated teenage boys glared at me. Their clothes were rags. Shadows filled the cavernous recesses of their clavicles and ribs.

In the next cell, a girl in gray camouflage paced like a jaguar. Her shoulder-length hair was stark white, though she looked no more than fifteen. Given her level of energy and outrage, I guessed she was a recent captive. She had no bow, but I pegged her as a Hunter of Artemis. When she saw me, she marched to the glass. She banged on it with her fists and shouted angrily, but her voice was too muffled for me to make out the words.

I counted six other cells, each one occupied. In the center of the room was a metal post with iron hooks and chains—the sort of place where one could fasten slaves for inspection before sale.

"Madre de los dioses," Leo muttered.

I thought the Arrow of Dodona was trembling in my quiver. Then I realized it was just me, shaking with anger.

I have always despised slavery. Partly, this is because twice before Zeus made me mortal and forced me to work as a slave for human kings. The most poetic description I can offer about that experience? It sucked.

Even before that, my temple at Delphi had created a special way for slaves to gain their freedom. With the help of my priests, thousands bought their emancipation through a ritual called the *trust sale*, by which I, the god Apollo, became their new master and then set them free.

Much later, one of my biggest grudges against the Romans was that they turned my holy island of Delos into the region's biggest slave market. Can you *believe* the nerve? I sent an angry army led by Mithradates to correct that situation, slaughtering twenty thousand Romans in the process. But I mean, *come on*. They had it coming.

Suffice to say: Commodus's prison reminded me of everything I hated about the Good Old Days.

Meg strode to the cell that held the two emaciated boys. With the point of her sword, she cut a circle in the glass and kicked it in. The dislodged section wobbled on the floor like a giant transparent coin.

The boys tried to stand without success. Meg jumped into the cell to help them.

"Yeah," Leo muttered with approval. He pulled a hammer from his tool belt and marched to the cell of the captive Hunter. He gestured *get back*, then whacked the glass. The hammer bounced off, narrowly missing Leo's nose on the rebound.

The Hunter rolled her eyes.

"Okay, Mr. Sheet of Glass." Leo tossed aside the hammer. "You're gonna be like that? It's on!"

His hands blazed white-hot. He pressed his fingers against the glass, which began to warp and bubble. Within seconds, he melted a ragged hole at face level.

The silver-haired girl said, "Good. Step aside."

"Hold on, I'll make you a bigger exit," Leo promised.

"No need." The silver-haired girl backed up, launched herself through the hole, and gracefully somersaulted next to us, grabbing Leo's discarded hammer as she stood.

"More weapons," the girl demanded. "I need more weapons."

Yes, I thought, definitely a Hunter of Artemis.

Leo pulled out a selection of tools for the girl's consideration. "Um, I got a screwdriver, a hacksaw, and…I think this is a cheese cutter."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "What are you, a tinkerer?"

"That's Lord Tinkerer to you."

The girl swiped the tools. "I'll take them all." She scowled at me. "What about your bow?"

"You can't have my bow," I said. "I'm Apollo."

Her expression changed from shock to understanding to forced calm. I guessed the plight of Lester Papadopoulos was known among the Hunters.

"Right," the girl said. "The rest of the Hunters should be on their way. I was the nearest to Indianapolis. I decided to play advance scout. Obviously, that didn't work out so well for me."

"In fact," I said, "there was an incursion at the front gates a few minutes ago. I suspect your comrades have arrived."

Her eyes darkened. "We need to leave, then. Quickly."

Meg helped the emaciated boys from their cell. Up close, they looked even

more pathetic and fragile, which made me angrier.

"Prisoners should never be treated this way," I growled.

"Oh, they weren't denied food," the silver-haired girl said, admiration creeping into her voice. "They've been on a hunger strike. Courageous…for a couple of boys. I'm Hunter Kowalski, by the way."

I frowned. "A Hunter named Hunter?"

"Yeah, I have heard *that* a million times. Let's free the others."

I found no convenient switch box to lower the glass doors, but with Meg and Leo's help, we began slowly liberating the captives. Most seemed to be human or demigod (it was difficult to tell which) but one was a dracaena. She looked human enough from the waist up, but where her legs should have been, twin snake tails undulated.

"She's friendly," Hunter assured us. "We shared a cell last night until the guards separated us. Her name's Sssssarah, with five *s*'s."

That was good enough for me. We let her out.

The next cell held a lone young man who looked like a professional wrestler. He wore only a red-and-white loincloth with matching beads around his neck, but he did not seem underdressed. Just as gods are often depicted nude because they are perfect beings, this prisoner had no reason to hide his body. With his dark, glossy skin, his shaved head, and his muscular arms and chest, he looked like a teak warrior brought to life through the craft of Hephaestus. (I made a mental note to ask Hephaestus about such a project later.) His eyes, also teak brown, were piercing and angry—beautiful in the way only dangerous things can be. Tattooed on his right shoulder was a symbol I did not recognize, some sort of a double-bladed ax.

Leo fired up his hands to melt the glass, but the dracaena Sssssarah hissed.

"Not that one," she warned. "Too dangeroussssss."

Leo frowned. "Lady, we *need* dangerous friends."

"Yessss, but that one fought for money. He wassss employed by the emperor. He'sssss only here now because he did ssssomething to anger Commodussss."

I studied Tall, Dark & Handsome. (I know that's a cliché, but he really *was* all three.) I didn't intend to leave anyone behind, especially someone who wore a loincloth so well.

"We're going to free you," I shouted through the glass, not sure how much he could hear. "Please don't kill us. We are enemies of Commodus, the man who put you here."

TD&H's expression did not change: part anger, part disdain, part indifference—the same way Zeus looked every morning before his coffee-infused nectar.

"Leo," I said. "Do it."

Valdez melted the glass. TD&H stepped out slowly and gracefully, as if he had all the time in the world.

"Hello," I said. "I'm the immortal god Apollo. Who might you be?"

His voice rolled like thunder. "I am Jimmy."

"A noble name," I decided, "worthy of kings."

"Apollo," Meg called. "Get over here."

She was staring into the last cell. *Of course* it would be the last cell.

Hunched in the corner, sitting on a familiar bronze suitcase, was a young girl in a lavender wool sweater and green jeans. On her lap sat a plate of prison slop, which she was using to finger-paint on the wall. Her tufts of brown hair looked like she'd cut them herself with gardening shears. She was large for her age—about Leo's size—but her babyish face told me she couldn't have been more than seven.

"Georgina," I said.

Leo scowled. "Why is she sitting on Festus? Why would they put him in there with her?"

I didn't have an answer, but I motioned for Meg to cut through the glass wall.

"Let me go first," I said.

I stepped through. "Georgie?"

The girl's eyes were like fractured prisms, swirling with unanchored thoughts and waking nightmares. I knew that look too well. Over the centuries I'd seen many mortal minds broken under the weight of prophecy.

"Apollo." She let out a burst of giggles as if her brain had developed a leak. "You and the dark. Some death, some death, some death."

24

Science can be fun
Squirt those toxic chemicals
Anywhere, really

GEORGINA GRABBED MY WRIST, sending an unpleasant chill up my forearm. “Some death.”

On the list of things that freaked me out, seven-year-old girls who giggled about death were right at the top, along with reptiles and talking weapons.

I remembered the prophetic limerick that had brought us west—the warning that I would be *forced death and madness to swallow.* Clearly, Georgina had encountered such horrors in the Cave of Trophonius. I did not fancy following her example. For one thing, I had zero skill at painting with prison slop.

“Yes,” I said agreeably. “We can talk more about death once we get you home. Emmie and Josephine sent me to get you.”

“Home.” Georgina spoke the word as if it were a difficult term from a foreign language.

Leo got impatient. He climbed into the cell and trotted over. “Hey, Georgie. I’m Leo. That’s a nice suitcase. Can I see it?”

Georgina tilted her head. “My clothes.”

“Oh, uh…yeah.” Leo brushed the name tag on his borrowed coveralls. “Sorry about the sewage stains and the burning smell. I’ll get ’em cleaned.”

“The burning hot,” Georgie said. “You. All of it.”

“Right…” Leo smiled uncertainly. “Ladies often tell me I’m all the burning hot. But don’t worry. I won’t set you on fire or anything.”

I offered Georgie my hand. “Here, child. We’ll take you home.”

She was content to let me help her. As soon as she was on her feet, Leo rushed to the bronze suitcase and began fussing over it.

“Oh, buddy, I’m so sorry,” he murmured. “I should *never* have left you. I’ll get you back to the Waystation for a good tune-up. Then you can have all the

Tabasco sauce and motor oil you want."

The suitcase did not respond. Leo managed to activate its wheels and handle so he could lug it out of the cell.

Georgina remained docile until she saw Meg. Then, suddenly, she had a burst of strength worthy of me.

"No!" She yanked herself from my grip and plunged back into her cell. I tried to calm her, but she continued to howl and stare at Meg in horror. "NERO! NERO!"

Meg did her famous turn-to-cement expression, shutting down all emotion, extinguishing all light from her eyes.

Hunter Kowalski rushed in to help with Georgie. "Hey. Hey, hey, hey." She stroked the girl's ratty hair. "It's okay. We're friends."

"Nero!" Georgie shrieked again.

Hunter frowned at Meg. "What's she talking about?"

Meg stared down at her high-tops. "I can leave."

"We're *all* leaving," I insisted. "Georgie, this is Meg. She escaped from Nero, that's true. But she's on our side."

I decided not to add, *Except for that one time she betrayed me to her stepfather and almost got me killed.* I didn't want to complicate matters.

In Hunter's kind embrace, Georgie calmed down. Her wide eyes and trembling body reminded me of a terrified bird held in cupped hands. "You and death and fire." Suddenly she giggled. "The chair! The chair, the chair."

"Ah, taters," I cursed. "She's right. We still need the chair."

Tall, Dark & Jimmy appeared on my left, a brooding presence not unlike a storm front. "What chair is this?"

"A throne," I said. "Magical. We need it to cure Georgie."

From the blank looks of the prisoners, I guessed I wasn't making much sense. I also realized I couldn't ask the entire group to go tromping through the palace in search of a piece of furniture, especially not the half-starved boys or the dracaena (who, not having feet, was incapable of tromping). Nor was Georgie likely to go anywhere with Meg—not without a great deal of shrieking.

"We'll have to split up," I decided. "Leo, you know the way back to the sewer tunnel. Take our new friends with you. Hopefully the guards will still be distracted. Meg and I will find the chair."

Leo glanced at his beloved dragon suitcase, then at Meg and me, then at the prisoners. "Just you and Meg?"

"Go," Meg said, careful to avoid Georgie's eyes. "We'll be okay."

"What if the guards *aren't* distracted?" Leo asked. "Or if we have to fight that snake thingie again?"

Jimmy rumbled, “Snake thingie?”

“I ressssent your choice of wordssss,” said Sssssarah.

Leo sighed. “I don’t mean you. It’s a…well, you’ll see. Maybe you can talk to it and convince it to let us pass.” He sized up Jimmy. “Or if not, the monster’s probably about the right size for you to make a belt out of.”

Sssssarah hissed in disapproval.

Hunter Kowalski wrapped her arms protectively around Georgie. “We’ll get everyone to safety,” she promised. “Apollo, Meg, thank you. If you see the emperor, send him to Tartarus for me.”

“Pleasure,” I said.

In the hallway, alarms began to blare.

Leo led our new friends back the way we’d come. Hunter held Georgina’s hand while Jimmy and Sssssarah propped up the hunger-strike boys.

Once the group disappeared around the corner, Meg walked to her little patch of chia. She closed her eyes in concentration. Faster than you could say *ch-ch-ch-chia*, the sprouts went into overdrive, spreading across the corridor like a fast-motion sheet of green ice. Sprouts wove together from ceiling to floor, wall to wall, until the hallway was clogged with an impassable curtain of plants.

“Impressive,” I said, though I was also thinking, *Well, we won’t be exiting that way.*

Meg nodded. “It’ll slow down anybody chasing our friends. Come on. The chair is down here.”

“How do you know?”

Rather than answering, she dashed off. Since she was the one with all the cool powers, I decided to follow.

Alarms continued to blare, the noise stabbing my eardrums like hot skewers. Red lights swept the corridors, turning Meg’s blades the color of blood.

We poked our heads inside the COMMODUS STOLEN ART GALLERY, the COMMODUS IMPERIAL CAFÉ, and the COMMODUSCARE INFIRMARY. We saw no one and found no magical thrones.

Finally, Meg stopped at a steel door. At least I assumed it was a door. It had no handle, lock, or visible hinges—it was just a featureless rectangle of metal set in the wall.

“It’s in here,” she said.

“How can you tell?”

She gave me her *nyah-nyah-nyah* look—the kind of expression your mother used to warn you about: *If you make that face, it’ll stick.* (I’d always taken this threat seriously, since divine mothers are fully capable of making it happen.)

“It’s like the trees, dummy.”

I blinked. “You mean, how you led us to the Grove of Dodona?”

“Yeah.”

“You can sense the Throne of Mnemosyne…because it is made of magical wood?”

“Dunno. I guess.”

That seemed like a stretch, even for a powerful daughter of Demeter. I didn’t know how the Throne of Mnemosyne had been created. It certainly *might* have been carved from some special tree from a sacred forest. Gods loved that sort of thing. If so, Meg might have been able to sense the chair. I wondered if she could find me a magical dining table once I got back to Olympus. I really needed one with foldout leaves for accommodating the Nine Muses at Thanksgiving.

Meg tried slicing the door the way she had with the glass walls in the prison. Her swords didn’t even scratch the metal. She tried wedging her blades into the door frame. No luck.

She stepped back and frowned at me. “Open it.”

“Me?” I felt sure she was picking on me because I was the only enslaved god she had. “I’m not Hermes! I’m not even Valdez!”

“Try.”

As if that were a simple request! I attempted all the obvious methods. I shoved the door. I kicked it. I attempted to get my fingertips under the edges and pry it open. I spread my arms and yelled the standard magic words: MELLON! SHAZAM! SESAME STREET! None of these worked. At last I tried my infallible ace in the hole. I sang “Love Is an Open Door” from the *Frozen* soundtrack. Even this failed.

“Impossible!” I cried. “This door has no taste in music!”

“Be more goddy,” Meg suggested.

If I could be more goddy, I wanted to scream, *I wouldn’t be here!*

I ran down the list of things I used to be the god of: archery, poetry, flirting, sunlight, music, medicine, prophecy, flirting. None of these would open a literal stainless steel door.

Wait…

I thought back to the last room we’d peeked in—the Commoduscare Infirmary. “Medical supplies.”

Meg peered at me from behind her filmy cat-eye lenses. “You’re going to heal the door?”

“Not exactly. Come with me.”

In the infirmary, I riffled through supply cabinets, filling a small cardboard box with potentially useful items: medical tape, oral syringes, scalpels, ammonia, distilled water, baking soda. Then, finally…“Aha!” In triumph, I held

up a bottle labeled H_2SO_4. “Oil of vitriol!”

Meg edged away. “What is that?”

“You’ll see.” I grabbed some safety equipment: gloves, mask, goggles—the sort of stuff I would not have bothered with as a god. “Let’s go, Chia Girl!”

“It sounded better when Leo said it,” she complained, but she followed me out.

Back at the steel door, I suited up. I readied two syringes: one with vitriol, one with water. “Meg, stand back.”

“I…Okay.” She pinched her nose against the stench as I squirted oil of vitriol around the door. Vaporous tendrils curled from the seams. “What *is* that stuff?”

“Back in medieval times,” I said, “we used oil of vitriol for its healing properties. No doubt that’s why Commodus had some in his infirmary. Today we call it sulfuric acid.”

Meg flinched. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Very.”

“And you *healed* with it?”

“It was the Middle Ages. We were crazy back then.”

I held up the second syringe, the one filled with water. “Meg, what I’m about to do—never, ever try this on your own.” I felt a bit silly giving this advice to a girl who regularly fought monsters with golden swords, but I had promised Bill Nye the Science Guy I would always promote safe laboratory practices.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked.

I stepped back and squirted water into the door seams. Immediately the acid began to hiss and spit more aggressively than the Carthaginian Serpent. To speed the process along, I sang a song of heat and corrosion. I chose Frank Ocean, since his soulful power could burn its way through even the hardest substances.

The door groaned and creaked. At last it fell inward, leaving a steaming wreath of mist around the frame.

“Whoa,” Meg said, which was probably the highest compliment she’d ever given me.

I pointed to the cardboard supply box near her feet. “Hand me that baking soda, would you?”

I sprinkled powder liberally around the doorway to neutralize the acid. I couldn’t help smirking at my own ingenuity. I hoped Athena was watching, because WISDOM, BABY! And I did it with so much more style than Old Gray Eyes.

I bowed to Meg with a flourish. “After you, Chia Girl.”

“You actually did something good,” she noted.

“You just *had* to step on my moment.”

Inside, we found a twenty-foot-square storage area holding just one item. The Throne of Mnemosyne hardly deserved the name *throne*. It was a straight-backed chair of sanded white birch, devoid of decoration except for the carved silhouette of a mountain on the seat back. Ugh, Mnemosyne! Give me a proper golden throne encrusted with ever-flaming rubies! Alas, not every deity knows how to flaunt it.

Still, the chair’s simplicity made me nervous. I’ve found that many terrible and powerful items are quite underwhelming in appearance. Zeus’s lightning bolts? They don’t look menacing until my father throws them. The trident of Poseidon? Please. He *never* scrubs the seaweed and moss off that thing. And the wedding dress Helen of Troy wore to marry Menelaus? Oh, gods, it was *so* drab. I told her, “Girl, you have got to be kidding me. That neckline doesn’t work for you at all!” Then Helen put it on, and *wow*.

“What’s the mountain design?” Meg stirred me from my reverie. “Olympus?”

“Actually, no. I’m guessing that would be Mount Pierus, where the goddess Mnemosyne gave birth to the Nine Muses.”

Meg scrunched up her face. “All nine of them at once? Sounds painful.”

I’d never thought about that. Since Mnemosyne was the goddess of memory, with every detail of her eternal existence engraved on her brain, it did seem strange that she’d want a reminder of her labor and delivery experience carved on her throne.

“Whatever the case,” I said, “we’ve tarried too long. Let’s get the chair out of here.”

I used my roll of medical tape to make shoulder straps, turning the chair into a makeshift backpack. Who said Leo was the only handy person on our team?

“Meg,” I said, “while I’m doing this, fill those syringes with ammonia.”

“Why?”

“Just for emergencies. Humor me.”

Medical tape is wonderful stuff. Soon Meg and I both had bandoliers of ammonia syringes, and I had a chair on my back. The throne was a light piece of furniture, which was fortunate, since it was knocking around with my ukulele, my bow, and my quiver. I added a few scalpels to my bandolier, just for fun. Now all I needed was a bass drum and some juggling pins and I could be a one-man traveling show.

I hesitated in the corridor. In one direction, the hallway extended about a hundred feet before angling left. The alarms had stopped blaring, but from around that corner came an echoing roar like ocean surf or a cheering crowd.

Multicolored lights flashed across the walls. Just looking in that direction made me nervous.

Our only other option would take us back to the Meg McCaffrey Memorial Wall of Chia.

"Fastest exit," I said. "We may have to retrace our steps."

Meg stood enthralled, her ear tilted toward the distant roar. "There's… something down there. We need to check it out."

"Please, no," I begged. "We've rescued the prisoners. We found Festus. We scored a lovely piece of furniture. That's a full day's work for *any* hero!"

Meg straightened. "Something important," she insisted.

She summoned her swords and strode toward the strange lights in the distance.

"I hate you," I muttered.

Then I shouldered my magical chair and jogged after her—around the corner and straight into a vast spotlighted arena.

25

Big birds are evil
They charge me with razor legs
I die and it hurts

I WAS NO STRANGER to stadium concerts.

In ancient times, I played a dozen sold-out shows at the amphitheater in Ephesus. Frenzied young women threw their *strophiae* at me. Young men swooned and fainted. In 1965, I sang with the Beatles at Shea Stadium, though Paul would *not* agree to turn up my microphone. On the recordings, you can't even hear my voice on "Everybody's Tryin' to Be My Baby."

However, none of my previous experiences prepared me for the emperor's arena.

Spotlights blinded me as we emerged from the corridor. The crowd cheered.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw that we stood at the fifty-yard line of a professional football stadium. The field was arranged in an odd fashion. Around the circumference ran a three-lane racetrack. Pincushioning the artificial turf, a dozen iron posts anchored the chains of various beasts. At one post, six combat ostriches paced like dangerous merry-go-round animals. At another, three male lions snarled and blinked at the spotlights. At a third, a sad-looking elephant swayed, no doubt unhappy that she'd been outfitted in spiked chain mail and an oversize Colts football helmet.

Reluctantly, I raised my eyes to the stands. In the sea of blue seats, the only occupied section was the end zone on the left, but the crowd was certainly enthusiastic. Germani banged their spears against their shields. The demigods of Commodus's Imperial Household jeered and yelled insults (which I will not repeat) about my divine person. Cynocephali—the tribe of wolf-headed men—howled and tore at their Indianapolis Colts souvenir jerseys. Rows of blemmyae clapped politely, looking perplexed at the rude behavior of their peers. And of course, an entire section of the stands was filled with wild centaurs. Honestly,

you can't have a sporting event or bloodbath *anywhere* without them somehow getting wind of it. They blew their vuvuzelas, sounded air horns, and trampled all over one another, sloshing root beer from their double-cup drinking hats.

In the center of the crowd gleamed the emperor's box, bedecked in purple and gold banners that clashed horribly with the blue-and-steel Colts decor. Flanking the throne were a grim mix of Germani and mortal mercenaries with sniper rifles. What the mercenaries saw through the Mist, I couldn't guess, but they must have been specially trained to work in magical environments. They stood emotionless and alert, their fingers resting across their triggers. I didn't doubt that they would kill us at one word from Commodus, and we would be powerless to stop them.

Commodus himself rose from his throne. He wore white-and-purple robes and a golden laurel crown, as one would expect of an emperor, but under the folds of his toga I caught a glimpse of a golden-brown racing suit. With his shaggy beard, Commodus looked more like a Gallic chieftain than a Roman, though no Gaul would have such perfect gleaming white teeth.

"At last!" His commanding voice boomed through the stadium, amplified by giant speakers that hung above the field. "Welcome, Apollo!"

The audience cheered and hooted. Lining the upper tiers, TV screens flashed digital fireworks and blazed the words WELCOME, APOLLO! High above, along the girders of the corrugated steel roof, bags of confetti burst, dumping a snowstorm of purple and gold that swirled around the championship banners.

Oh, the irony! This was *exactly* the sort of welcome I'd been longing for. Now I just wanted to slink back into the corridor and disappear. But, of course, the doorway we'd come through had vanished, replaced with a cinder-block wall.

I crouched as inconspicuously as possible and pressed the indentation on my iron manacle. No wings sprang from the shackle, so I guessed I'd found the right button for the emergency signal. With luck, it would alert Jo and Emmie to our plight and location, though I still wasn't sure what they could do to help us. At least they'd know where to collect our bodies later.

Meg seemed to be withdrawing into herself, rolling down her mental shutters against the onslaught of noise and attention. For a brief terrible moment, I wondered if she might have betrayed me once again—leading me right into the clutches of the Triumvirate.

No. I refused to believe it. And yet…why *had* she insisted on coming this direction?

Commodus waited for the roar of the crowd to subside. Combat ostriches strained at their tethers. Lions roared. The elephant shook her head as if trying to

remove her ridiculous Colts helmet.

"Meg," I said, trying to control my panic. "Why did you…Why are we…?"

Her expression was as mystified as the demigods at Camp Half-Blood who'd been drawn to the Grove of Dodona by its mysterious voices.

"Something," she murmured. "Something is here."

That was a horrifying understatement. *Many* things were here. Most of them wanted to kill us.

The video screens flashed more fireworks, along with digital nonsense like DEFENSE! and MAKE SOME NOISE! and advertisements for energy drinks. My eyes felt as if they were bleeding.

Commodus grinned down at me. "I had to rush things, old friend! This is just the dress rehearsal, but since you're here, I scrambled to put together a few surprises. We'll restage the whole show tomorrow with a full audience, after I bulldoze the Waystation to the ground. Do try to stay alive today, but you're welcome to suffer as much as you want. And Meg…" His *tsk-tsk-tsk* echoed through the stadium. "Your stepfather is *so* disappointed in you. You're about to find out just how much."

Meg pointed one of her swords at the emperor's box. I waited for her to issue some withering retort, like *You're stupid*, but the sword seemed to be her entire message. This brought back an unsettling memory of Commodus himself in the Colosseum, tossing severed ostrich heads at the senators' seats and pointing: *You're next.* But Meg couldn't have known about that…could she?

Commodus's smile wavered. He held up a page of notes. "So, anyway, the run of show! First, the citizens of Indianapolis are marched in at gunpoint and seated. I'll say a few words, thank them for coming, and explain how their city is now named Commodianapolis."

The crowd howled and stomped. A lone air horn blasted.

"Yes, yes." Commodus waved away their enthusiasm. "Then I send an army of blemmyae into the city with champagne bottles to smash against all the buildings. My banners are unfurled along all the streets. Any bodies we retrieve from the Waystation are dangled on ropes from the girders up there"—he gestured at the peaked ceiling—"and then the fun starts!"

He threw his notes in the air. "I can't tell you how excited I am, Apollo! You understand, don't you, this was all preordained? The spirit of Trophonius was *very* specific."

My throat made the sound of a vuvuzela. "You consulted the Dark Oracle?"

I wasn't sure my words would carry that far, but the emperor laughed. "Well, of course, dear heart! Not me personally. I have minions to do that sort of thing. But Trophonius was quite clear: once I destroy the Waystation and sacrifice your

life in the games, only then can I rechristen this city and rule the Midwest forever as god-emperor!”

Twin spotlights fixed on Commodus. He ripped off his toga, revealing a one-piece racing suit of Nemean Lion hide, the front and sleeves decorated with the decals of various corporate sponsors.

The crowd oohed and ahhed as the emperor turned a circle, showing off his outfit.

“You like?” he asked. “I’ve done a lot of research on my new hometown! My two fellow emperors call this place boring. But I will prove them wrong! I will stage the best Indy-Colt-500-Double-A Gladiatorial Championship ever!”

Personally, I thought Commodus’s branding needed work, but the crowd went wild.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Country music blared from the speakers: possibly Jason Aldean, though with the distortion and reverb, even my keen ears could not be sure. At the opposite side of the track, a wall opened. Three Formula One race cars—red, yellow, and blue, like a children’s toy set—rumbled onto the tarmac.

Around the field, chains disconnected from the animals’ collars. In the stands, wild centaurs threw fruit and blew their vuvuzelas. From somewhere behind the emperor’s box, cannons fired, launching a dozen gladiators over the goalposts toward the field. Some landed with graceful rolls and came up ready to fight. Others hit the artificial turf like heavily-armored spit wads and didn’t move again.

The race cars revved and sped around the track, forcing Meg and me onto the field to avoid getting run over. Gladiators and animals began a free-for-all, no-claws-barred destructo-match to the Nashville beat. And then, for no logical reason, a huge sack opened under the Jumbotron monitor, spilling hundreds of basketballs onto the fifty-yard line.

Even by Commodus’s standards, the spectacle was crass and too much of everything, but I doubted I would live long enough to write a bad review. Adrenaline raced through my system like a 220-volt current. Meg yelled and charged the nearest ostrich. Since I had nothing better to do, I raced after her, the Throne of Mnemosyne and thirty pounds of other gear bouncing on my back.

All six ostriches bore down on us. That may not sound as terrifying as the Carthaginian Serpent or a bronze colossus of *moi*, but ostriches can run at forty miles an hour. They charged with their metal teeth snapping, their spiked helmets swiping side to side, their barbed-wire legs trampling across the turf like an ugly pink forest of deadly Christmas trees.

I nocked an arrow in my bow, but even if I could match Commodus’s skill, I

doubted I could decapitate all six birds before they killed us. I wasn't even sure Meg could defeat so many with her formidable blades.

I silently composed a new death haiku right on the spot: *Big birds are evil / They charge me with razor legs / I die and it hurts.*

In my defense, I did not have much time to edit.

The only thing that saved us? Basketballs *ex machina*. Another bag must have opened above us, or perhaps a small batch of balls had gotten stuck in the netting. Twenty or thirty rained down around us, forcing the ostriches to dodge and veer. One less fortunate bird stepped on a ball and took a header, planting his sharpened beak in the turf. Two of his brethren stumbled over him, creating a dangerous pile-up of feathers, legs, and razor wire.

"Come on!" Meg yelled to me. Rather than fighting the birds, she grabbed one's neck and swung onto its back, somehow without dying. She charged away, swinging her blades at monsters and gladiators.

Mildly impressive, but how was I supposed to follow her? Also, she'd just rendered useless my plan of hiding behind her. Such an inconsiderate girl.

I shot my arrow at the nearest threat: a Cyclops charging me and waving his club. Where he'd come from, I had no idea, but I sent him back to Tartarus where he belonged.

I dodged a fire-breathing horse, kicked a basketball into the gut of a gladiator, then sidestepped a lion who was lunging at a tasty-looking ostrich. (All of this, by the way, with a chair strapped to my back.)

Meg aimed her deadly bird at the emperor's box, slashing down anything that got in her way. I understood her plan: kill Commodus. I staggered after her as best I could, but my head throbbed from the pounding country music, the jeering of the crowd, and the whine of the Formula One engines gaining speed around the track.

A pack of wolf-headed warriors loped toward me—too many, at too close range for my bow. I ripped off my bandolier of medical syringes and squirted ammonia in their lupine faces. They screamed, clawing their eyes, and began to crumble to dust. As any Mount Olympian custodian can tell you, ammonia is an excellent cleaning agent for monsters and other blemishes.

I made my way toward the only island of calm on the field: the elephant.

She did not seem interested in attacking anyone. Given her size and formidable chain-mail defenses, none of the other combatants seemed anxious to approach her. Or perhaps, seeing her Colts helmet, they simply didn't want to mess with the home team.

Something about her was so sad, so despondent, I felt drawn to her as a kindred spirit.

I pulled out my combat ukulele and strummed an elephant-friendly song: Primus's "Southbound Pachyderm." The instrumental intro was haunting and sad—perfect for solo ukulele.

"Great elephant," I sang as I approached. "May I ride you?"

Her wet brown eyes blinked at me. She huffed as if to say, *Whatever, Apollo. They got me wearing this stupid helmet. I don't even care anymore.*

A gladiator with a trident rudely interrupted my song. I smashed him in the face with my combat ukulele. Then I used the elephant's foreleg to climb onto her back. I hadn't practiced that technique since the storm god Indra took me on a late-night road trip in search of vindaloo, but I guess riding an elephant is one of those skills you never forget.

I spotted Meg at the twenty-yard line, leaving groaning gladiators and piles of monster ash in her wake as she rode her ostrich toward the emperor.

Commodus clapped with delight. "Well done, Meg! I'd love to fight you, but HOLD THAT THOUGHT!"

The music abruptly shut off. Gladiators stopped in mid-combat. The race cars slowed to an idle. Even Meg's ostrich paused and looked around as if wondering why it was suddenly so quiet.

Over the speakers came a dramatic drumroll.

"Meg McCaffrey!" Commodus boomed in his best game-show announcer voice. "We've got a special surprise for you—straight from New York, someone you know! Can you save him before he bursts into flames?"

Spotlight beams crossed in midair at a point above the end zone, level with the top of the goalposts. That old post-vindaloo feeling came back to me, burning its way through my intestines. Now I understood what Meg had sensed earlier—that vague *something* that had drawn her into the stadium. Suspended from the rafters by a long chain, snarling and wriggling in a rope cocoon, was the emperor's special surprise: Meg's trusty sidekick, the karpos Peaches.

26

I tip my hat to
The excellent elephant
Let's be besties, 'kay?

I NOCKED AN ARROW and fired at the chain.

In most circumstances, my first instinct was to shoot. Usually this worked out. (Unless you count the time Hermes burst into my bathroom without knocking. And, yes, I always keep my bow handy when I'm on the toilet. Why would I not?)

This time, my shot was ill-planned. Peaches struggled and swung so much, my arrow sailed past his chain and felled a random blemmyae in the stands.

"Stop!" Meg shrieked at me. "You might hit Peaches!"

The emperor laughed. "Yes, that would be a shame when he's about to burn to death!"

Commodus leaped from his box onto the racetrack. Meg raised her sword and prepared to charge, but mercenaries in the stands leveled their rifles. No matter that I was fifty yards away—the snipers had aim worthy of…well, me. A swarm of red targeting dots floated over my chest.

"Now, now, Meg," the emperor chided, pointing to me. "My game, my rules. Unless you want to lose *two* friends in the dress rehearsal."

Meg lifted one sword, then the other, weighing them like options. She was too far away for me to clearly see her expression, but I could sense her agony. How many times had I been caught in such a dilemma? Do I destroy the Trojans or the Greeks? Do I flirt with my sister's Hunters and risk getting slapped, or do I flirt with Britomartis and risk getting blown up? These are the kinds of choices that define us.

As Meg hesitated, a pit crew in togas rolled another Formula One car onto the track—a bright purple machine with a golden number 1 on the hood. Protruding from the roof was a wiry lance about twenty feet tall, topped with a

wad of cloth.

My first thought: Why did Commodus need such a big antenna? Then I looked again at the dangling karpos. In the spotlights, Peaches glistened as if he'd been slathered with grease. His feet, usually bare, were covered in rough sandpaper—like the striking surface of a matchbook.

My gut twisted. The race car's antenna wasn't an antenna. It was a giant match, set at just the right height to ignite against Peaches's feet.

"Once I'm in the car," Commodus announced, "my mercenaries will not interfere. Meg, you may try to stop me any way you please! My plan is to complete one circuit, light your friend on fire, then circle back around and hit you and Apollo with my car. I believe they call that a victory lap!"

The crowd roared with approval. Commodus leaped into his car. His pit crew scattered, and the purple racer peeled out in a cloud of smoke.

My blood turned to cold-pressed olive oil, pumping sluggishly through my heart. How long would it take for that race car to get around the track? Seconds, at most. I suspected Commodus's windshield was arrow-proof. He wouldn't leave me such an easy solution. I didn't even have time for a decent ukulele riff.

Meanwhile, Meg guided her ostrich under the swinging karpos. She stood on the bird's back (no easy task) and reached as high as she could, but Peaches was much too far above her.

"Turn into a fruit!" Meg shouted up at him. "Disappear!"

"Peaches!" Peaches wailed, which probably meant: *Don't you think I would if I could?* I guessed that the ropes were somehow magically restricting his shape-shifting, confining him to his present form, much as Zeus had shoehorned my awesome divinity into the miserable body of Lester Papadopoulos. For the first time, I felt a kinship with the diapered demon baby.

Commodus was now halfway around the track. He could have gone faster, but he insisted on swerving and waving to the cameras. The other race cars pulled over to let him pass, making me wonder if they understood the concept of racing.

Meg leaped from the ostrich's back. She caught the goalpost's crossbeam and began to climb, but I knew she wouldn't have time to help the karpos.

The purple car rounded the far end zone. If Commodus accelerated in the straightaway, it would all be over. If only I could block his path with something large and heavy.

Oh, wait, thought my genius brain, *I am sitting on an elephant.*

Engraved across the base of the massive Colts helmet was the name LIVIA. I assumed that was the elephant's.

I leaned forward. "Livia, my friend, do you feel like stomping an emperor?"

She trumpeted—her first real show of enthusiasm. I knew elephants were intelligent, but her willingness to help surprised me. I got the feeling that Commodus had treated her terribly. Now she wanted to kill him. This, at least, we had in common.

Livia charged toward the track, shouldering other animals aside, sweeping her trunk to smack gladiators out of our path.

"Good elephant!" I cried. "Excellent elephant!"

The Throne of Memory bounced precariously on my back. I spent all my arrows (except for the stupid talking one) shooting down combat ostriches, fire-breathing horses, Cyclopes, and cynocephali. Then I snatched up my combat ukulele and played the bugle call for *CHARGE!*

Livia barreled down the center lane, heading for the purple race car. Commodus veered straight toward us, his grinning face reflected on every video monitor around the stadium. He looked delighted by the prospect of a head-on collision.

Me, not so much. Commodus was hard to kill. My elephant and I were not, nor was I sure how much protection Livia's chain mail would give her. I'd been hoping we might force Commodus off the road, but I should've known he would never back down in a game of chicken. Without a helmet, his hair flapped wildly around him, making his golden laurels look like they were on fire.

Without a helmet…

I pulled a scalpel from my bandolier. Leaning forward, I sawed through the chin strap off Livia's football helmet. It snapped easily. Thank the gods for cheap plastic merchandise!

"Livia," I said. "Throw it!"

The excellent elephant understood.

Still charging full speed ahead, she curled her trunk around her face guard and flung the helmet like a gentleman tipping his hat…if that hat were allowed to hurtle forward as a deadly projectile.

Commodus swerved. The giant white helmet bounced off his windshield, but the real damage had been done. Purple One vaulted onto the field at an impossibly steep angle, canted sideways, and flipped three times, bowling over a herd of ostriches and a couple of unlucky gladiators.

"OHHHHHHH!" The crowd rose to its feet. The music stopped. The remaining gladiators backed toward the edge of the field, eyeing the overturned imperial race car.

Smoke poured from the chassis. The wheels spun, sloughing off shavings of tread.

I wanted to believe the crowd's silence was a hopeful pause. Perhaps, like

me, their fondest wish was that Commodus would *not* emerge from the wreckage, that he had been reduced to an imperial smear on the artificial turf at the forty-two-yard line.

Alas, a steaming figure crawled from the wreckage. Commodus's beard smoldered. His face and hands were black with soot. He rose, his smile undimmed, and stretched as if he'd just had a good nap.

"Nice one, Apollo!" He grabbed the chassis of the ruined race car and lifted it over his head. "But it will take more than this to kill me!"

He tossed the car aside, flattening an unfortunate Cyclops.

The audience cheered and stomped.

The emperor called, "CLEAR THE FIELD!"

Immediately dozens of animal handlers, medics, and ball retrievers rushed onto the turf. The surviving gladiators sulked away, as if realizing no fight to the death could compete with what Commodus had just done.

As the emperor ordered his servants around, I glanced toward the end zone. Somehow, Meg had climbed all the way to the top of the goalpost. She leaped toward Peaches and caught his legs, causing a great deal of screeching and cursing from the karpos. For a moment, they swung together from the chain. Then Meg climbed her friend's body, summoned her sword, and slashed the chain. They dropped twenty feet, landing on the track in a heap. Happily, Peaches acted as a cushion for Meg. Given the soft, squishy nature of peach fruit, I imagined Meg would be fine.

"Well!" Commodus strode toward me. He limped slightly on his right ankle, but if it caused him any serious pain, he gave no sign. "That was a good rehearsal! Tomorrow, more deaths—including yours, of course. We'll tweak the combat phase. Perhaps add a few more race cars and basketballs? And, Livia, you naughty old elephant!" He wagged his finger at my pachyderm mount. "*That's* the sort of energy I was looking for! If you'd showed that much enthusiasm in our previous games, I wouldn't have had to kill Claudius."

Livia stomped and trumpeted. I stroked the side of her head, trying to calm her, but I could feel her intense anguish.

"Claudius was your mate," I guessed. "Commodus killed him."

The emperor shrugged. "I *did* warn her: play my games or else. But elephants are so stubborn! They're big and strong and used to getting their way—rather like gods. Still"—he winked at me—"it's amazing what a little punishment can accomplish."

Livia stamped her feet. I knew she wanted to charge, but after seeing Commodus toss a race car, I suspected he would have little trouble hurting Livia.

"We will get him," I murmured to her. "Just wait."

“Yes, until tomorrow!” Commodus agreed. “You’ll get another chance to do your worst. But for now—ah, here come my guards to escort you to your cell!”

A squadron of Germani hustled onto the field with Lityerses in the lead.

Across his face, the Cornhusker had an ugly new bruise that looked suspiciously like an ostrich’s footprint. That pleased me. He was also bleeding from several new cuts on his arms, and his pant legs were slashed to ribbons. The rips looked like grazes from small-game arrowheads, as if the Hunters had been toying with their target, doing their best to eliminate his trousers. This pleased me even more. I wished I could add a new arrow wound to Lityerses’s collection—preferably one right in the middle of his sternum—but my quiver was empty except for the Arrow of Dodona. I’d had enough drama for one day without adding bad Shakespearean dialogue.

Lityerses bowed awkwardly. “My lord.”

Commodus and I spoke in unison. “Yes?”

I thought I looked much more lordly sitting atop my chain-mail elephant, but Lityerses just sneered at me.

“My lord, *Commodus*,” he clarified, “the invaders have been pushed back from the main gates.”

“About time,” the emperor muttered.

“They were Hunters of Artemis, sire.”

“I see.” Commodus didn’t sound particularly concerned. “Did you kill them all?”

“We…” Lit gulped. “No, my lord. They sniped at us from multiple positions and fell back, leading us into a series of traps. We only lost ten men, but—”

“You lost ten.” Commodus examined his soot-stained fingernails. “And how many of these Hunters did you kill?”

Lit edged away. His neck veins pulsed. “I—I am not sure. We found no bodies.”

“So you cannot confirm any kills.” Commodus glanced at me. “What would you advise, Apollo? Should I take time to reflect? Should I consider the consequences? Should I perhaps tell my prefect, Lityerses, not to worry? He will be fine? He will ALWAYS HAVE MY BLESSINGS?”

This last line he screamed, his voice echoing through the stadium. Even the wild centaurs in the stands fell quiet.

“No,” Commodus decided, his tone once again calm. “Alaric, where are you?”

One of the Germani stepped forward. “Sire?”

“Take Apollo and Meg McCaffrey into custody. See that they get nice cells for the night. Put the Throne of Mnemosyne back into storage. Kill the elephant

and the karpos. What else? Oh, yes.” From the boot of his racing suit, Commodus pulled a hunting knife. “Hold Lityerses’s arms for me while I cut his throat. It’s time for a new prefect.”

Before Alaric could carry out these orders, the stadium’s roof exploded.

27

Destroy me a roof
Bring me wenches with winches
We're so out of here

WELL, I SAY *EXPLODED*. More accurately, the roof crumpled inward, as roofs tend to do when a bronze dragon smashes into them. Girders bent. Rivets popped. Sheets of corrugated metal groaned and folded with a sound like colliding aircraft carriers.

Festus plummeted through the gap, his wings unfolding to slow his descent. He seemed no worse for wear from his time in suitcase form, but judging from the way he blowtorched the audience in the stands, I guessed he was feeling a bit cranky.

Wild centaurs stampeded, trampling the mortal mercenaries and Germani. The blemmyae clapped politely, perhaps thinking the dragon was part of the show, until a wave of flames reduced them to dust. Festus flew his own fiery victory lap around the track, torching race cars, as a dozen silvery ropes uncoiled from the roof, lowering the Hunters of Artemis into the arena like a clutter of spiders.

(I've always found spiders fascinating creatures, despite what Athena thinks. If you ask me, she's just jealous of their beautiful faces. BOOM!)

More Hunters remained on the roofline with their bows drawn, laying down suppressing fire as their sisters lowered themselves to the field. As soon as the rappellers hit the turf, they drew bows, swords, and knives and leaped into battle.

Alaric, along with most of the emperor's Germani, charged to meet them.

At the goalpost, Meg McCaffrey worked frantically to cut Peaches free from his ropes. Two Hunters dropped next to her. They had a hurried conversation with lots of pointing, something along the lines of: *Hello, we are your friends. You're going to die. Come with us.*

Clearly agitated, Meg glanced across the field in my direction.

I yelled, “GO!”

Meg allowed the Hunters to grab her and Peaches. Then the Hunters slapped some sort of mechanisms on the sides of their belts and shot back up their ropes as if the laws of gravity were mere recommendations.

Motorized winches, I thought, a very nice accessory. If I live through this, I’m going to recommend that the Hunters of Artemis make T-shirts that read WENCHES WITH WINCHES. I’m sure they’ll love that idea.

The closest group of Hunters charged in my direction, meeting the Germani in battle. One of the Hunters looked familiar, with choppy black hair and dazzling blue eyes. Instead of the usual gray camo of Artemis’s followers, she wore jeans and a black leather jacket that was held together with safety pins and had patches for the Ramones and Dead Kennedys. A silver tiara glinted on her forehead. On one arm, she brandished a shield imprinted with the gruesome visage of Medusa—not the original, I suspected, since that would’ve turned me to stone, but a good enough replica to make even the Germani cower and back away.

The girl’s name came to me: Thalia Grace. Artemis’s lieutenant, the leader of the Hunters, had personally come to rescue me.

“Save Apollo!” she yelled.

My spirits soared.

Yes, thank you! I wanted to yell. *FINALLY someone has their priorities straight!*

I felt, for a moment, as if the world were back in its proper order.

Commodus sighed in exasperation. “I did *not* schedule this for my games.” He looked around, apparently just realizing he had only two guards and Lityerses left to command. The rest were already in combat. “Lityerses, get out there!” he snapped. “Slow them down while I go change. I can’t fight in a racing outfit. This is ridiculous!”

Lit’s eye twitched. “Sire…you were about to relieve me of duty. By killing me?”

“Oh, right. Well, then go sacrifice yourself! Prove you’re more useful than that idiot father of yours! Honestly, Midas had the golden touch, and he *still* couldn’t do anything right. You’re no better!”

The skin around Lityerses’s ostrich bruise reddened, as if the bird were still standing on his face. “Sire, with respect—”

Commodus’s hand shot out like a rattlesnake, clamping around the swordsman’s throat.

“*Respect?*” the emperor hissed. “You talk to me of *respect*?”

Arrows sailed toward the emperor’s remaining guards. Both Germani fell

with lovely new silver-feathered nose piercings.

A third missile hurtled toward Commodus. The emperor yanked Lityerses into its path and the arrow point erupted from the front of Lit's thigh.

The swordsman screamed.

Commodus dropped him in disgust. "Do I have to kill you myself? *Really?*" He raised his knife.

Something inside me, no doubt a character flaw, made me feel pity for the wounded Cornhusker.

"Livia," I said.

The elephant understood. She trunk-smacked Commodus upside the head, knocking him flat on the turf. Lityerses fumbled for the hilt of his sword. Finding it, he jabbed the point into the emperor's exposed neck.

Commodus howled, clamping his hand over the wound. Judging from the amount of blood, I deduced that the cut, sadly, had missed his jugular.

Commodus's eyes blazed. "Oh, Lityerses, you *traitor*. I will kill you *slowly* for that!"

But it was not meant to be.

The closest Germani, seeing their emperor bleeding on the ground, ran to his aid. Livia scooped up Lityerses and backed us away as the barbarians closed ranks around Commodus, forming a shield wall, their bristling polearms pointed at us. The Germani looked ready to counterattack, but before they could, a line of flames rained down between our two groups. Festus the dragon landed next to Livia. The Germani hastily retreated while Commodus screamed, "Put me down! I need to kill those people!"

Atop Festus, Leo saluted me like a fellow fighter pilot. "What's up, Lesteropoulos? Jo got your emergency signal. She sent us back right away."

Thalia Grace jogged over with two of her Hunters. "We need to evacuate. We'll be overrun in a few minutes." She pointed to the end zone, where the survivors from Festus's fiery victory lap were starting to form ranks: a hundred assorted centaurs, cynocephali, and demigods from the Imperial Household.

I glanced to the sidelines. Leading into the lowest tier of seats was a ramp—possibly wide enough for an elephant. "I'm not leaving Livia behind. Take Lityerses. And take the Throne of Memory." I unslung the chair, thankful again for its light weight, and tossed it across to Leo. "That throne *has* to get back to Georgie. I'll ride Livia out one of the mortal exits."

The elephant dumped Lityerses onto the turf. The Cornhusker groaned and pressed his hands around the arrow in his leg.

Leo frowned. "Uh, Apollo—"

"I will not leave this noble elephant behind to be tortured!" I insisted.

“No, I get that.” Leo pointed at Lit. “But why would we take *this* fool? He tried to kill me in Omaha. He threatened Calypso at the zoo. Can’t I just let Festus stomp him?”

“No!” I wasn’t sure why I felt so strongly about it. Commodus betraying this swordsman made me almost as angry as Nero manipulating Meg, or…well, yes, Zeus abandoning me in the mortal world for the *third time*. “He needs healing. He’ll behave himself, won’t you, Lit?”

Lityerses grimaced in pain, blood soaking through his tattered jeans, but he managed a slight nod.

Leo sighed. “Whatever, man. Festus, we’re taking this bleeding idiot with us, okay? But if he gets uppity en route, feel free to chuck him against the side of a skyscraper.”

Festus creaked in agreement.

“I’ll go with Apollo.” Thalia Grace climbed up behind me on the elephant—which fulfilled a daydream I’d once had about the pretty Hunter, though I hadn’t imagined it happening quite this way. She nodded at one of her comrades. “Iphigenia, get the rest of the Hunters out of here. Go!”

Leo grinned and slung the Throne of Memory across his back. “See y’all back home. And don’t forget to pick up some salsa!”

Festus flapped his metallic wings. The dragon grabbed Lityerses and launched himself skyward. The Hunters activated their winches. They ascended as the first wave of angry spectators arrived on the field, throwing spears and vuvuzelas that fell clattering back to earth.

When the Hunters were gone, the crowd turned their attention to us.

“Livia,” I said. “How fast can you run?”

The answer: fast enough to evade an armed mob, especially with Thalia Grace on her back, shooting arrows and brandishing her shield of terror at anyone who got too close.

Livia seemed to know the corridors and ramps of the stadium. They’d been designed for large crowds, which made them equally convenient for elephants. We made a few turns around the souvenir kiosks, barreled through a service tunnel, and finally emerged on a loading dock on South Missouri Street.

I’d forgotten how wonderful sunlight felt! Crisp fresh air on a late winter day! Granted, it wasn’t as exhilarating as driving the sun chariot, but it was a darn sight better than the snake-infested sewers of Commode Palace.

Livia lumbered down Missouri Street. She turned into the first blind alley she saw, then stomped and shook. I was pretty sure I understood her message:

Take off this stupid chain mail.

I translated for Thalia, who shouldered her bow. “I don’t blame her. Poor elephant. Women warriors should travel light.”

Livia lifted her trunk as if to say thank you.

We spent the next ten minutes de-armoring the elephant.

Once we were done, Livia gave Thalia and me a group hug with her trunk.

My adrenaline rush was fading, leaving me feeling like a deflated inner tube. I sank down with my back against the brick wall and shivered in my damp clothes.

Thalia produced a canteen from her belt. Instead of offering it to me first, as would have been proper, she poured some liquid into her cupped hand and let Livia drink. The elephant slurped down five handfuls, not much for a big animal, but she blinked and grunted in a satisfied way. Thalia took a sip herself, then handed the canteen to me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled. I drank, and my vision cleared immediately. I felt as if I’d just had six hours of sleep and a good hot meal.

I stared in amazement at the battered canteen. “What *is* this? Not nectar…”

“No,” Thalia agreed. “It’s moonwater.”

I’d dealt with the Hunters of Artemis for millennia, but I had never heard of moonwater. I recalled Josephine’s story about bootlegging in the 1920s. “Do you mean moonshine? As in liquor?”

Thalia laughed. “No. It’s not alcoholic, but it *is* magic. Lady Artemis never told you about this stuff, eh? It’s like an energy drink for Hunters. Men rarely ever get a taste.”

I poured a tiny bit into my palm. The stuff looked like regular water, though perhaps more silver, as if it had been blended with a trace amount of liquid mercury.

I considered taking another sip, then decided it might make my brain vibrate to the point of liquefying. I passed back the canteen. “Have you…Have you talked to my sister?”

Thalia’s expression turned serious. “In a dream, a few weeks ago. Lady Artemis said that Zeus has forbidden her from seeing you. She’s not even supposed to give us orders to help you.”

I had suspected as much, but having my fears confirmed would have overwhelmed me with despair if not for the moonwater. Its energy burst kept me humming right along over the deeper emotions, like wheels skimming across the top of loose sand.

“You’re not supposed to help me,” I said. “And yet you’re here. Why?”

Thalia gave me a coy smile that would have made Britomartis proud. “We

were just in the area. Nobody *ordered* us to help. We've been searching for a particular monster for months now and…" She hesitated. "Well, that's another story. The point is, we were passing through. We helped you the way we'd help any demigod in danger."

She didn't mention anything about Britomartis finding the Hunters and urging them to come here. I decided to play her little game of let's-pretend-that-never-happened.

"Can I guess another reason?" I asked. "I think you decided to help me because you *like* me."

The corner of Thalia's mouth twitched. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, come now. The first time we met, you said I was hot. Don't think I didn't hear that comment."

I was gratified to see her face turn red.

"I was younger then," she said. "I was a different person. I'd just spent several years as a pine tree. My vision and reasoning were impaired from sap damage."

"Ouch," I complained. "That's harsh."

Thalia punched my arm. "You need an occasional dose of humility. Artemis says so all the time."

"My sister is a sneaky, deceptive—"

"Watch it," Thalia warned. "I *am* her lieutenant."

I crossed my arms in a petulant, Meg sort of way. "Artemis never told me about moonwater. She never told me about the Waystation. It makes me wonder how many other secrets she's hiding."

"Maybe a few." Thalia's tone was carefully nonchalant. "But you've gotten to see more this week than most non-Hunters ever do. You should feel lucky."

I stared down the alley, thinking of that first New York alley I'd fallen into as Lester Papadopoulos. So much had changed since then, yet I was no closer to being a god. In fact, the memory of being a god seemed more distant than ever. "Yes," I grumbled. "Very lucky."

"Come on." Thalia offered me a hand. "Commodus won't wait long before he launches a reprisal. Let's get our elephant friend back to the Waystation."

28

Belching stinky smoke
What gene pool did you come from?
Wait. What? (Insert scream)

AS IT TURNED OUT, getting an elephant into the Waystation was not as hard as I'd imagined.

I'd had visions of trying to cram Livia up a ladder chute, or renting a helicopter to drop her through the roof hatch into the griffin nests. But as soon as we arrived at the side of the building, bricks rumbled and rearranged themselves, creating a wide archway and a gentle downward ramp.

Livia tromped inside without hesitation. At the bottom of the corridor, we found a perfect elephant stable with high ceilings, ample stacks of hay, slatted windows to let in the sunlight, a stream wending through the middle of the room, and a big-screen television turned to Hephaestus-TV's Elephant Channel, showing *The Real Elephants of the African Veld*. (I did not know Hephaestus-TV had such a channel. It must have been included in the premium bundle, which I didn't subscribe to.) Best of all, there was not a gladiator or a set of elephant armor in sight.

Livia huffed in approval.

"I'm glad you like it, my friend." I dismounted, followed by Thalia. "Now enjoy yourself while we go find our hosts."

Livia waded into the stream and rolled onto her side, giving herself a trunk shower. She looked so content I was tempted to join her, but I had less pleasant matters to attend to.

"Come on," Thalia said. "I know the way."

I didn't see how. The Waystation shifted and changed so much, it shouldn't have been possible for anyone to learn their way around. But true to her word, Thalia led me up several flights of stairs, through a gymnasium I'd never seen, and back to the main hall, where a crowd had gathered.

Josephine and Emmie knelt by the sofa where Georgina lay shaking, crying, and giggling. Emmie tried to get the little girl to drink some water. Jo dabbed Georgie's face with a washcloth. Next to them stood the Throne of Mnemosyne, but I couldn't tell whether they had tried to use it yet. Certainly, Georgie appeared no better.

Over at Josephine's workstation, Leo was inside Festus's chest cavity, using a welding torch. The dragon had curled up as tightly as possible, but he still took up a third of the room. The side of his rib cage was propped open like the hood of a Mack truck. Leo's legs stuck out, sparks showering the floor around him. Festus didn't seem concerned by this invasive surgery. Deep in his throat, he made a low, clattering purr.

Calypso looked fully recovered from yesterday's jaunt to the zoo. She dashed around the room, bringing food, drink, and medical supplies to the rescued prisoners. Some of the folks we'd freed made themselves right at home, helping themselves to the pantry, rummaging through cabinets with such familiarity I suspected they'd been longtime residents at the Waystation before being captured.

The two emaciated boys sat at the dining table, trying to pace themselves as they chewed pieces of fresh bread. Hunter Kowalski, the silver-haired girl, stood in a tight circle with the other Hunters of Artemis as they muttered together and cast suspicious glances at Lityerses. The Cornhusker sat in a recliner in the corner, facing the wall, his wounded leg now properly bandaged.

Sssssarah the dracaena had discovered the kitchen. She stood at the counter, holding a basket of fresh henhouse eggs, swallowing each whole, one after the other.

Tall, Dark & Jimmy was up in the griffin roost, making friends with Heloise and Abelard. The griffins allowed him to scratch under their beaks—a sign of great trust, especially since they were guarding an egg in their nest (and no doubt worried that Sssssarah might see it). Sadly, Jimmy had put on clothes. He now wore a caramel-brown business suit with an open-collared dress shirt. I didn't know where he'd found such a nice outfit to fit his massive frame. Perhaps the Waystation supplied clothing as easily as it supplied elephant habitats.

The rest of the freed prisoners milled around, nibbling on bread and cheese, staring in awe at the stained-glass ceiling and occasionally flinching at loud noises, which was completely normal for those suffering from Post-Commodus Stress Disorder. Headless Agamethus floated among the newcomers, offering them his Magic 8 Ball, which I suppose was his idea of schmoozing.

Meg McCaffrey had changed into a different green dress and jeans, which completely threw off her usual stoplight color scheme. She walked over to me,

punched me in the arm, then stood next to me as if we were waiting for a bus.

"Why did you hit me?" I asked.

"Saying hello."

"Ah…Meg, this is Thalia Grace."

I wondered if Meg would hit her hello as well, but Meg simply reached across and shook Thalia's hand. "Hi."

Thalia smiled. "A pleasure, Meg. I've heard you're quite a swordswoman."

Meg squinted through her grimy glasses. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Lady Artemis has been watching you. She keeps an eye on all promising young women warriors."

"Oh, no," I said. "You can tell my beloved sister to back off. Meg is *my* demigod companion."

"*Master*," Meg corrected.

"Same difference."

Thalia laughed. "Well, if you two will excuse me, I'd better go check on my Hunters before they kill Lityerses." The lieutenant marched off.

"Speaking of that…" Meg pointed toward the wounded son of Midas. "Why'd you bring him here?"

The Cornhusker hadn't moved. He stared at the wall, facing away from the crowd as if intentionally inviting a knife in the back. Even from across the room, waves of hopelessness and defeat seemed to radiate from him.

"You said it yourself," I told Meg. "Everything living deserves a chance to grow."

"Hmph. Chia seeds don't work for evil emperors. They don't try to kill your friends."

I realized Peaches was nowhere to be seen. "Is your karpos all right?"

"He's okay. Went away for a while…" She waved vaguely at the air, indicating that magical land where peach spirits go when they are not devouring their enemies or screaming *PEACHES!* "You actually *trust* Lit?"

Meg's tone was harsh, but her lower lip trembled. She lifted her chin as if preparing for a punch—the same way Lityerses had looked when the emperor betrayed him, the same way the goddess Demeter had looked, ages ago, standing in front of Zeus's throne, her voice full of pain and disbelief: *Will you actually let Hades get away with kidnapping my daughter Persephone?*

Meg was asking if we could trust Lityerses. But her *real* question was much larger: Could she trust anyone? Was there anyone in the world—family, friend, or Lester—who would ever truly have her back?

"Dear Meg," I said. "I can't be sure about Lityerses. But I think we must try. We only fail when we stop trying."

She studied a callus on her index finger. “Even after somebody tries to kill us?”

I shrugged. “If I gave up on everyone who has tried to kill me, I would have *no* allies left on the Olympian Council.”

She pouted. “Families are dumb.”

“On that,” I said, “we can fully agree.”

Josephine glanced over and saw me. “He’s here!”

She hustled over, grabbed my wrist, and hauled me toward the couch. “We’ve been waiting! What took you so long? We have to use the chair!”

I bit back a retort.

It might have been nice to hear, *Thank you, Apollo, for freeing all these prisoners! Thank you for returning our daughter!* She could at least have decorated the main hall with a few APOLLO IS THE GREATEST banners, or offered to remove the uncomfortable iron manacle on my ankle.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” I complained.

“Yes, we did,” Josephine said. “Every time we tried to put Georgie in the throne, she flailed around and shrieked your name.”

Georgie’s head lolled toward me. “Apollo! Death, death, death.”

I winced. “I really wish she’d stop making that connection.”

Emmie and Josephine lifted her gently and set her on the Throne of Mnemosyne. This time, Georgie did not resist.

Curious Hunters and freed prisoners gathered around, though I noticed Meg stayed in the back of the room, well away from Georgina.

“The notepad on the counter!” Emmie pointed toward the kitchen. “Someone grab it, please!”

Calypso did the honors. She hurried back with a small yellow legal pad and a pen.

Georgina swayed. Suddenly all her muscles seemed to melt. She would have slumped out of the chair if her parents hadn’t held her.

Then she sat bolt upright. She gasped. Her eyes flew open, her pupils as wide as quarters. Black smoke belched from her mouth. The rancid smell, like boiling roof tar and rotten eggs, forced everyone back except for the dracaena, Sssssarah, who sniffed the air hungrily.

Georgina tilted her head. Smoke curled through the choppy brown tufts of her hair as if she were an automaton, or a blemmyae with a malfunctioning fake noggin.

“Father!” Her voice pierced my heart—so sharp and painful, I thought my bandolier of scalpels had turned inward. It was the same voice, the same cry I had heard thousands of years ago, when Trophonius had prayed in agony,

pleading for me to save Agamethus from the collapsed thieves' tunnel.

Georgina's mouth contorted into a cruel smile. "So have you finally heard my prayer?"

Her voice was still that of Trophonius. Everyone in the room looked at me. Even Agamethus, who had no eyes, seemed to fix me with a withering glare.

Emmie tried to touch Georgina's shoulder. She recoiled as if the little girl's skin were molten hot. "Apollo, what is this?" she demanded. "This isn't prophecy. This has never happened before—"

"You sent this little sister of mine to do your errands?" Georgina tapped her own chest, her eyes wide and dark, still focused on me. "You're no better than the emperor."

I felt as if a chain-mail elephant were standing on my chest. *This little sister?* If he meant that literally, then…

"Trophonius." I could barely speak. "I—I didn't send Georgina. She isn't my __"

"Tomorrow morning," Trophonius said. "The cave will only be accessible at first light. Your prophecy will unfold—or the emperor's. Either way, there will be no hiding in your little haven. Come in person. Bring the girl, your master. You will both enter my sacred cavern."

A horrible laugh escaped Georgina's mouth. "Perhaps both of you will survive. Or will you suffer the same fate as my brother and I? I wonder, Father, to whom will you pray?"

With one final belch of blackness, Georgina toppled sideways. Josephine scooped her up before she could hit the floor.

Emmie rushed to help. Together they placed Georgie gently on the couch again, tucking her in with blankets and pillows.

Calypso turned to me. The empty notepad dangled from her hand. "Correct me if I'm wrong," she said, "but that was no prophecy. That was a message to you."

The collective gaze of the crowd made my face itch. It was the same feeling I used to have when an entire Greek village looked to the heavens and called my name, pleading for rain, and I was too embarrassed to explain that rain was actually Zeus's department. The best I could offer them was a catchy new song.

"You're right," I said, though it pained me to agree with the sorceress. "Trophonius did not give the girl a prophecy. He gave her a—a recorded greeting."

Emmie stepped toward me, her fists clenched. "Will she be healed? When a prophecy's expelled on the Throne of Memory, the supplicant usually returns to normal within a few days. Will Georgie—" Her voice broke. "Will she come

back to us?"

I wanted to say yes. Back in the old days, the recovery rate for supplicants of Trophonius had been around 75 percent. And that was when the petitioners were properly prepared by the priests, the rituals all done correctly, and the prophecy interpreted on the throne immediately after visiting the cave of terrors. Georgina had sought out the cave on her own with little or no preparation. She'd been trapped with that madness and darkness for weeks.

"I—I don't know," I admitted. "We can hope—"

"We can *hope*?" Emmie demanded.

Josephine took her hand. "Georgie *will* get better. Have faith. That's better than hope."

But her eyes stayed on me a little too long—accusing, questioning. I prayed she would not fetch her submachine gun.

"Ahem," Leo said. His face was lost in the shadow of his raised welding visor, his grin fading in and out of sight à la the Cheshire Cat. "Uh…the thing about *little sister*? If Georgie is Trophonius's sister, does that mean…?" He pointed at me.

Never before had I wished I were a blemmyae. Now, I wanted to hide my face inside my shirt. I wanted to pull off my head and throw it across the room. "I don't know!"

"It would explain a lot," Calypso ventured. "Why Georgina felt so attuned to the Oracle, why she was able to survive the experience. If you…I mean…not Lester, but Apollo is her parent—"

"She *has* parents." Josephine put her arm around Emmie's waist. "We're standing right here."

Calypso raised her hands in apology. "Of course. I just meant—"

"Seven years," Emmie interrupted, stroking her daughter's forehead. "Seven years we've raised her. It never mattered where she came from, or who her biological parents might have been. When Agamethus brought her…we checked the news. We checked the police reports. We sent Iris-messages to all our contacts. *No one* had reported a missing baby girl like her. Her birth parents either didn't want her, or couldn't raise her…." She glared at me. "Or maybe they didn't even know she existed."

I tried to remember. Honestly, I did. But if the god Apollo had enjoyed a brief romance with some Midwesterner eight years ago, I had no recollection of it. I was reminded of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had also come to my attention when he was seven years old. Everyone said, *Oh, surely he is the son of Apollo!* The other gods looked at me for confirmation, and I wanted *so badly* to say, *Yes, that boy's genius was all me!* But I simply could not remember ever

having met Wolfgang's mother. Or, for that matter, his father.

"Georgina has excellent parents," I said. "Whether she is a child of—of Apollo…I'm sorry, I can't say for sure."

"You can't say," Josephine echoed flatly.

"B-but I do think she will heal. Her mind is strong. She risked her life and her sanity to bring us that message. The best we can do now is follow the Oracle's instructions."

Josephine and Emmie exchanged looks that said, *He's a scoundrel, but we have too much going on right now. We'll kill him later.*

Meg McCaffrey crossed her arms. Even she seemed to sense the wisdom of changing the subject. "So we go at first light?"

Josephine focused on her with difficulty, as if wondering where Meg had suddenly appeared from. (I had this thought often.) "Yes, hon. That's the only time you can enter the Cavern of Prophecy."

I sighed inwardly. First it had been the zoo at first light. Then the Canal Walk at first light. Now the caverns. I really wished dangerous quests could start at a more reasonable time, like perhaps three in the afternoon.

An uneasy silence settled over the room. Georgina breathed raggedly in her sleep. Up in the roost, the griffins ruffled their feathers. Jimmy cracked his knuckles pensively.

Finally, Thalia Grace stepped forward. "What about the rest of the message: 'Your prophecy will unfold—or the emperor's. No hiding in your little haven'?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted.

Leo raised his arms. "All hail the god of prophecy!"

"Oh, shut up," I grumbled. "I don't have enough information yet. If we survive the caverns—"

"I can interpret those lines," Lityerses said from his chair in the corner.

The son of Midas turned to face the crowd, his cheeks a patchwork of scars and bruises, his eyes empty and desolate. "Thanks to the tracking devices I put on your griffins, Commodus knows where you are. He'll be here first thing tomorrow morning. And he'll wipe this place off the map."

29

Carrot-peeling god
Tofu stir-fry is good, but
Needs more ìgboyà

LITYERSES HAD A TALENT for making friends.

Half the crowd surged forward to kill him. The other half shouted that they, too, wanted to kill him and the first half should get out of their way.

"You villain!" Hunter Kowalski yanked Lityerses from his chair and shoved him against the wall. She pressed a borrowed screwdriver against his throat.

"Ssssstand asssside!" Sssssarah yelled. "I will sssswallow him whole!"

"I should've thrown him against the side of the building," Leo growled.

"STOP!" Josephine waded through the mob. Not surprisingly, folks moved aside. She pulled Hunter Kowalski off her prey, then glared at Lityerses as if he were a chariot with a busted axle. "You put trackers on our griffins?"

Lit rubbed his neck. "Yes. And the plan worked."

"You're *sure* Commodus knows our location?"

Normally, I avoided attracting the attention of an angry mob, but I felt compelled to speak.

"He's telling the truth," I said. "We heard Lityerses talking to Commodus in the throne room. Leo was supposed to tell you about that."

"Me?" Leo protested. "Hey, things were chaotic! I thought you—" His welding visor fell shut, making the rest of his sentence unintelligible.

Lityerses spread his arms, which were so scarred they looked like testing logs for hacksaw blades. "Kill me if you want. It'll make no difference. Commodus will level this place and everyone in it."

Thalia Grace drew her hunting knife. Instead of gutting the swordsman, she drove the blade into the nearest coffee table. "The Hunters of Artemis won't allow that. We've fought too many impossible battles. We've lost too many of our sisters, but we've never backed down. Last summer, in the Battle of Old San

Juan…” She hesitated.

It was difficult to imagine Thalia at the edge of tears, but she seemed to be struggling to maintain her punk rock facade. I remembered something Artemis had told me when we were in exile together on Delos…how her Hunters and the Amazons had fought the giant Orion in Puerto Rico. An Amazon base had been destroyed. Many had died—Hunters who, if not cut down in battle, might have continued to live for millennia. As Lester Papadopoulos, I found that idea freshly horrifying.

“We will *not* lose the Waystation too,” Thalia continued. “We’ll stand with Josephine and Emmie. We kicked Commodus’s podex today. We’ll do it again tomorrow.”

The Hunters cheered. I may have cheered also. I always love it when courageous heroes volunteer to fight battles I don’t want to fight.

Lityerses shook his head. “What you saw today was only a fraction of Commodus’s full strength. He’s got…*vast* resources.”

Josephine grunted. “Our friends gave him a bloody nose today, at least. Maybe he won’t attack tomorrow. He’ll need time to regroup.”

Lit let out a broken laugh. “You don’t know Commodus like I do. You just made him mad. He won’t wait. He *never* waits. First thing tomorrow, he’ll strike *hard*. He’ll kill us all.”

I wanted to disagree. I wanted to think that the emperor would drag his feet, then decide to leave us alone because we’d been so entertaining at the dress rehearsal, then possibly send us a box of chocolates by way of apology.

But I *did* know Commodus. I remembered the Flavian Amphitheater floor littered with corpses. I remembered the execution lists. I remembered him snarling at me, his lips flecked with blood: *You sound like my father. I’m done thinking about consequences!*

“Lityerses is right,” I said. “Commodus received a prophecy from the Dark Oracle. He needs to destroy this place and kill me before he can have his naming ceremony tomorrow afternoon. Which means he’ll strike in the morning. He’s not a fan of waiting for what he wants.”

“We could ssssslither away,” suggested Sssssarah. “Move. Hide. Live to fight another day.”

At the back of the crowd, the ghost Agamethus pointed empathically to the dracaena, obviously agreeing with her idea. You have to wonder about your chances in combat when even your dead friends are worried about dying.

Josephine shook her head. “I’m not slithering anywhere. This is our home.”

Calypso nodded. “And if Emmie and Jo are staying put, so are we. They saved our lives. We’ll fight to the death for them. Right, Leo?”

Leo raised his visor. “Absolutely. Though I’ve already done the whole *dying* thing, so I’d prefer to fight to someone else’s death. For instance, Commode Man’s—”

“Leo,” Calypso warned.

“Yeah, we’re in. They’ll never get past us.”

Jimmy slipped to the front through a line of Hunters. Despite his size, he moved as gracefully as Agamethus, almost as if floating.

“I owe you a debt.” He inclined his head to the Hunters, to Meg and me, to Josephine and Emmie. “You saved me from the madman’s prison. But I hear much talk about *us* and *them*. I am always wary when people speak this way, as if people can be so easily divided into friend and enemy. Most of us here do not even know each other.”

The big man swept a hand across the crowd: Hunters, ex-Hunters, an ex-god, an ex-Titaness, demigods, a snake woman, a couple of griffins, a decapitated ghost. And downstairs, we had an elephant named Livia. Rarely had I seen a more motley collection of defenders.

“Also, this one.” Jimmy pointed to Lityerses. Jimmy’s voice remained a sonorous rumble, but I fancied I could hear thunderclaps under the surface, ready to break loose. “Is he now a friend? Am I to fight side by side with my enslaver?”

Hunter Kowalski brandished her screwdriver. “Not likely.”

“Wait!” I yelped. “Lityerses can be useful.”

Again, I wasn’t sure why I spoke up. It seemed counterproductive to my main goal, which was to always keep myself safe and popular. “Lityerses knows Commodus’s plans. He knows what sort of forces will attack us. And Lityerses’s life is at stake, just like ours are.”

I explained how Commodus had ordered Lit’s death, and how Lityerses had stabbed his former master in the neck.

“That doesssss not make me trusssssst him,” Sssssarah hissed.

The crowd grumbled in agreement. A few Hunters reached for their weapons.

“Hold it!” Emmie climbed onto the dining table.

Her long hair had come undone from its braid, strands of silver sweeping the sides of her face. Her hands were splotchy with bread dough. Over her camouflage combat clothes, she wore an apron with a picture of a hamburger and the slogan KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF MY BUNS.

Still, the hard gleam in her eyes reminded me of that young princess of Naxos who had jumped off a cliff with her sister, trusting the gods—the princess who had decided she would rather die than live in fear of her drunken angry

father. I had never considered that growing older, grayer, and thicker might make someone more beautiful. Yet that seemed to be the case for Emmie. Standing on the table, she was the room's calm, steady center of gravity.

"For those of you who don't know me," she began, "my name is Hemithea. Jo and I run the Waystation. We never turn away people who are in trouble, even former enemies." She nodded to Lityerses. "We attract outcasts here—orphans and runaways, folks who've been abused, mistreated, or misled, folks who just don't feel at home anywhere else."

She gestured to the barreled ceiling, where the stained glass fractured sunlight into green and gold geometry. "Britomartis, the Lady of Nets, helped build this place."

"A safety net for your friends," I blurted, remembering what Josephine had told me. "But a trap for your enemies."

Now I was the center of attention. Once again, I didn't like it. (I was *really* starting to worry about myself.) My face burned from the sudden flush of blood to my cheeks. "Sorry," I told Emmie.

She studied me as if wondering where to aim her next arrow. She had, apparently, not quite forgiven me for possibly being Georgina's divine father, even though she'd had that news for at least five minutes. I supposed I could forgive her. Sometimes such a revelation can take an hour or more to process.

At last, she nodded brusquely. "Apollo is right. Tomorrow we may be attacked, but our enemies are going to find out that the Waystation protects its own. Commodus *won't* leave this net alive. Josephine and I will fight to defend this place and anyone who is under our roof. If you want to be part of our family, for a day or forever, you are welcome. *All* of you." She looked directly at Lit.

The Cornhusker's face paled, his scars almost disappearing. He opened his mouth to say something but managed only a choking noise. He slid down against the wall and began to shudder, silently sobbing.

Josephine crouched next to him. She gazed at the crowd as if asking, *Anybody still got a problem with this guy?*

Next to me, Jimmy grunted. "I like these women," he said. "They have *ìgboyà*."

I didn't know what ìgboyà meant. I couldn't even guess what language it was. But I liked the way Jimmy said it. I decided I would have to purchase some ìgboyà as soon as possible.

"Well, then." Emmie wiped her hands on her apron. "If anyone wants to leave, now's the time to say so. I'll make you a brown bag lunch to go."

No one replied.

"Right," Emmie said. "In that case, everyone gets an afternoon chore!"

She made me peel carrots.

Honestly, we were facing an imminent invasion, and I—the former god of music—was stuck in the kitchen prepping salad. I should have been strolling around with my ukulele, lifting everyone's spirits with my songs and my shining charisma, not skinning root vegetables!

On the bright side, the Hunters of Artemis had to clean the cow pens, so perhaps there was some justice in the cosmos.

Once dinner was ready, the crowd scattered across the main hall to eat. Josephine sat with Lityerses in his corner, talking to him slowly and calmly, the way one might treat a pit bull rescued from a bad owner. Most of the Hunters sat in the griffin roosts, dangling their legs over the ledge as they surveyed the hall below. From their low voices and grave expressions, I imagined they were talking about how best to kill large numbers of enemies tomorrow.

Hunter Kowalski volunteered to bunk in Georgina's room for the night. The little girl had remained fast asleep since her experience on the Throne of Memory, but Hunter wanted to be there for her just in case she woke up. Emmie gratefully agreed, but not until after shooting me an accusatory look that said, *I don't see* you *volunteering to sit with your kid all night.* Honestly, as if I was the first god who'd ever forgotten he sired a child who was then carried away by a decapitated ghost to be raised by two women in Indianapolis!

The two half-starved demigods, brothers named Deacon and Stan, who I learned had been residents of the Waystation for over a year, now rested in the infirmary with IV drips of nectar. Sssssarah had taken a basket of eggs and slithered off to the sauna for the night. Jimmy ate with some of the other escapees on the sofas, which did not make me feel neglected at all.

This left me at the dining table with Meg (what else is new?), Leo, Calypso, Emmie, and Thalia Grace.

Emmie kept glancing across the room at Josephine and Lityerses. "Our new friend, Lityerses…" She sounded remarkably earnest when she said the word *friend*. "I talked with him during chore time. He helped me churn the ice cream. He told me quite a bit about the armies we'll be facing tomorrow."

"There's ice cream?" I asked. I had a natural ability to focus on the most important details when someone was talking.

"Later," Emmie promised, though her tone told me I might not be getting any. "It's vanilla. We were going to add frozen peaches, but…" She looked at Meg. "We thought that might be in poor taste."

Meg was too busy shoveling tofu stir-fry into her mouth to respond.

"At any rate," Emmie continued, "Lityerses estimates a few dozen mortal mercenaries, about the same number of demigods from the Imperial Household,

a few hundred assorted cynocephali and other monsters, plus the usual hordes of blemmyae disguised as local police, firefighters, and bulldozer operators."

"Oh, good," said Thalia Grace. "The usual hordes."

Emmie shrugged. "Commodus means to raze Union Station. He'll make it look to the mortals like an emergency evacuation."

"A gas leak," Leo guessed. "It's almost always a gas leak."

Calypso picked the shredded carrots out of her salad, which I took as a personal insult. "So we're outnumbered ten to one? Twenty to one?"

"No sweat," Leo said. "I'll handle the first two hundred or so myself, then if I get tired—"

"Leo, stop." Calypso gave Emmie an apologetic frown. "He jokes more when he's nervous. He also jokes *worse* when he's nervous."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Leo inserted carrot fangs in his mouth and snarled.

Meg almost choked on her stir-fry.

Thalia let out a long sigh. "Oh, yeah. This is going to be a fun battle. Emmie, how are you stocked for extra arrows? I'm going to need a full quiver just for shooting Leo."

Emmie smiled. "We have plenty of weaponry. And thanks to Leo and Josephine, the Waystation's defenses have never been stronger."

"You're welcome!" Leo spat out his fangs. "Also I should mention the giant bronze dragon in the corner—assuming I can finish his tune-up tonight. He's still not at a hundred percent."

Normally, I would've found that giant bronze dragon quite reassuring, even at 75 percent, but I did not like twenty-to-one odds. The bloodthirsty cries of the arena audience still rang in my ears.

"Calypso," I said, "what about your magic? Has it returned?"

Her look of frustration was quite familiar. It was the same look I got whenever I thought of all the marvelous godly things I could no longer do.

"Only a few bursts," she said. "This morning, I moved a coffee cup across the counter."

"Yeah," Leo said, "but you did that *awesomely*."

Calypso swatted him. "Josephine says it'll take time. Once we…" She hesitated. "Once we survive tomorrow."

I got the feeling that wasn't what she'd intended to say. Leo and Emmie exchanged a conspiratorial glance. I didn't press the issue. At the moment, the only conspiracy I'd be interested in would be a clever plan to smuggle me back to Mount Olympus and reinstate me to godhood before breakfast tomorrow.

"We will make do," I decided.

Meg slurped down the last of her stir-fry. Then she demonstrated her usual exquisite manners by belching and wiping her mouth with her forearm. “Not you and me, Lester. We won’t be here.”

My stomach started tossing its own little salad. “But—”

“Prophecy, dummy. First light, remember?”

“Yes, but if the Waystation is attacked…shouldn’t we be here to help?”

This was an odd question coming from me. When I was a god, I would have been delighted to leave the mortal heroes to fend for themselves. I would have made popcorn and watched the bloodbath from a distance on Mount Olympus, or simply caught the highlight reel later. But as Lester, I felt obliged to defend these people—my dear old Emmie, gruff Josephine, and not-so-little Georgina, who might or might not be my child. Thalia and the Hunters, Jimmy of the Lovely Loincloth, the proud griffin parents upstairs, the excellent elephant downstairs, even the dislikable Lityerses…I wanted to be here for them.

It may seem strange to you that I hadn’t already considered my conflicting obligation—to seek out the Cave of Trophonius at first light—and that this might prevent me from being at the Waystation. In my defense, gods can split their essence into many different manifestations at once. We don’t have a lot of experience with scheduling.

“Meg is right,” Emmie said. “Trophonius has summoned you. Getting *your* prophecy may be the only way to prevent the emperor’s prophecy from coming true.”

I was the god of prophecies, and even *I* was starting to hate prophecies. I glanced at the spirit of Agamethus, hovering by the ladder to the loft. I thought of the last message he had given me: *We cannot remain.* Did he mean the defenders of the Waystation? Or Meg and me? Or something else entirely? I felt so frustrated I wanted to grab his Magic 8 Ball and bounce it off his nonexistent head.

“Cheer up,” Thalia told me. “If Commodus comes at us with his full strength, the Oracle might be guarded with just a skeleton crew. It’ll be your best chance to get in.”

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Besides, maybe you’ll make it back in time to fight with us! Or, you know, we’ll all die, and it won’t matter.”

“That makes me feel much better,” I grumbled. “What problems could we possibly run into, just Meg and I?”

“Yep,” Meg agreed.

She did not sound the least bit worried. This seemed like a failure of imagination to me. I could envision all sorts of horrible fates that might befall two people wandering into the dangerous cavern of a terrifying, hostile spirit. I

would rather fight a host of blemmyae on bulldozers. I would even consider peeling more carrots.

As I was cleaning up the dinner plates, Emmie caught my arm.

“Just tell me one thing,” she said. “Was it payback?”

I stared at her. “Was…what payback?”

“Georgina,” she murmured. “For me…you know, giving up your gift of immortality. Was she…” She pressed her lips into a tight line, as if she didn’t trust them to say any more.

I hadn’t known I could feel any worse, until I did. I really hate that about the mortal heart. It seems to have an infinite capacity for getting heavier.

“Dear Emmie,” I said. “I would *never*. Even on my worst days, when I’m destroying nations with plague arrows or putting together set lists for Kidz Bop compilations, I would *never* take revenge in such a way. I swear to you, I had no idea you were here, or that you had left the Hunters, or that Georgina existed, or…Actually, I just had no idea about anything. And I’m so sorry.”

To my relief, a faint smile flickered on her face. “That’s one thing I can believe, at least.”

“That I am sorry?”

“No,” she said. “That you had no idea about anything.”

“Ah…So, we’re good?”

She considered. “For now. But when Georgie recovers…we should talk further.”

I nodded, though I was thinking that my to-do list of unwelcome tasks was already quite full.

“Well, then.” I sighed. “I suppose I should get some rest, and perhaps start composing a new death haiku.”

30

Lester, slap yourself
Oh, for just one night without
Looking like a fool

I HAD NO LUCK WITH THE HAIKU.

I kept getting stuck on the first line, *I don't want to die,* and couldn't think of anything to add. I hate elaborating when the main idea is so perfectly clear.

The Hunters of Artemis bedded down in the griffin roosts after setting trip wires and motion-sensor alarms. They always did this whenever I camped with them, which I found silly. Sure, when I was a god, I used to flirt with them shamelessly, but I never went further than that. And as Lester? I had no wish to die with a thousand silver arrows in my chest. If nothing else, the Hunters should have trusted my self-interest.

Thalia, Emmie, and Josephine sat together at the kitchen table for a long while, conversing in hushed tones. I hoped they were discussing more Hunter secrets—some deadly weapons they could use against Commodus's armies. Moon–ballistic missiles, perhaps. Or moon-napalm.

Meg hadn't bothered finding a guest room. She'd crashed on the nearest couch and was snoring away.

I stood nearby, not ready to go back to the room I shared with Leo Valdez. I watched the moon rise through the giant rose window above Josephine's workstation.

A voice at my shoulder said, "Not tired?"

It was a good thing I was no longer god of the sun. If someone had startled me that badly in my chariot, I would've charged upward so fast that high noon would've happened at 6:00 A.M.

Jimmy stood next to me, a dapper apparition in brown. The moonlight gleamed copper on his scalp. His necklace of red and white beads peeked from beneath the collar of his dress shirt.

“Oh!” I said. “Um…Nah.” I leaned against the wall, hoping to look casual, attractive, and suave. Unfortunately, I missed the wall.

Jimmy was kind enough to pretend not to notice. “You should try to sleep,” he rumbled. “The challenge you face tomorrow…” Worry lines creased his forehead. “I cannot imagine.”

Sleep seemed like an alien concept, especially now, with my heart *chunk-chunk-chunk*ing like a defective pedal boat. “Oh, I don’t sleep much. I used to be a god, you know.” I wondered if flexing my muscles would help prove this point. I decided it would not. “And you? Are you a demigod?”

Jimmy grunted. “An interesting word. I would say I am *e·lo·mìíràn*—one of the *others*. I am also a graduate accounting student at Indiana University.”

I had no idea what to do with that information. I could think of no topics of conversation that would make me look interesting to a graduate student of accounting. I also hadn’t realized how much older Jimmy was than me. I mean mortal Lester me, not god me. I was confused.

“But Sssssarah said you worked for Commodus?” I recalled. “You’re a gladiator?”

The edges of his mouth tugged downward. “Not a gladiator. I only fight on weekends for money. Mixed martial arts. Gidigbo and Dambe.”

“I don’t know what those are.”

He chuckled. “Most people don’t. They are Nigerian martial-art forms. The first, Gidigbo, is a wrestling style of my people, the Yoruba. The other is a Hausa sport, more violent, but I like it.”

“I see,” I said, though in fact I didn’t.

Even in ancient times, I had been woefully ignorant of anything below the Saharan Desert. We Olympians tended to stay in our own neighborhood around the Mediterranean, which was, I agree, terribly cliquish. “You fight for money?”

“To pay my tuition,” Jimmy agreed. “I did not know what I was getting into with this emperor person.”

“And yet you survived,” I noted. “You can see that the world is, uh, much stranger than most mortals realize. You, Jimmy, must have lots of *ìgboyà*.”

His laughter was deep and rich. “Very good. My name is actually Olujime. For most Americans, Jimmy is easier.”

I understood. I’d only been a mortal for a few months and I was getting very tired of spelling out *Papadopoulos*.

“Well, Olujime,” I said, “I’m pleased to meet you. We are lucky to have such a defender.”

“Mmm.” Olujime nodded gravely. “If we survive tomorrow, perhaps the Waystation can use an accountant. A piece of real estate so complex…there are

many tax implications."

"Uh—"

"I am joking," he offered. "My girlfriend says I joke too much."

"Uh." This time I sounded like I'd been kicked in the gut. "Your girlfriend. Yes. Will you excuse me?"

I fled.

Stupid Apollo. Of course Olujime had a girlfriend. I didn't know who or what he was, or why fate had dragged him into our strange little world, but obviously someone so interesting would not be single. Besides, he was much too old for me, or young, depending on how you looked at it. I decided not to look at it at all.

Exhausted but restless, I wandered the shifting corridors until I stumbled upon a small library. When I say *library*, I mean the old-fashioned kind without books, just scrolls stacked in cubbies. Ah, the smell of papyrus brought me back!

I sat at the table in the center of the room and remembered the chats I used to have in Alexandria with the philosopher Hypatia. Now *she* was a smart *melomakarona*. I wished she were here now. I could've used her advice on how to survive the Cave of Trophonius.

Alas, at present, my only advisor was stuck in the quiver on my back. Reluctantly, I pulled out the Arrow of Dodona and set it on the table.

The shaft of the arrow rattled against the table. *LONG HAST THOU KEPT ME QUIVERED. VERILY, THY LEVELS OF STUPID ASTOUND ME.*

"Have you ever wondered," I asked, "why you have no friends?"

UNTRUE, said the arrow. *EACH BRANCH OF DODONA'S SACRED GROVE, EACH TWIG AND ROOT—TO ALL OF THESE, I AM MOST DEAR.*

I doubted that. More likely, when it had come time to choose a branch to carve into an arrow to send on a quest with me, the entire grove had unanimously elected this particularly annoying length of ash. Even sacred Oracles could only stand hearing *forsooth* and *verily* so many times.

"Then tell me," I said, "O, Wise Arrow, most dear to all manner of trees, how do we get to the Cave of Trophonius? And how do Meg and I survive?"

The arrow's fletching rippled. *THOU SHALT TAKE A CAR.*

"That's it?"

LEAVEST THOU WELL BEFORE DAWN. 'TIS A COUNTER-COMMUTE, AYE, BUT THERE SHALL BE CONSTRUCTION ON HIGHWAY THIRTY-SEVEN. EXPECTEST THOU TO TRAVEL ONE HOUR AND FORTY-TWO MINUTES.

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you somehow…checking Google Maps?"

A long pause. *OF COURSE NOT. FIE UPON YOU. AS FOR HOW THOU*

SHALT SURVIVE, ASK ME THIS ANON, WHEN THOU REACHEST THY DESTINATION.

"Meaning you need time to research the Cave of Trophonius on Wikipedia?"

I SHALL SAY NO MORE TO YOU, BASE VILLAIN! THOU ART NOT WORTHY OF MY SAGE ADVICE!

"*I'm* not worthy?" I picked up the arrow and shook it. "You're no help at all, you useless piece of—!"

"Apollo?" Calypso stood in the doorway.

Next to her, Leo grinned. "We didn't realize you were arguing with your arrow. Should we come back later?"

I sighed. "No, come in."

The two of them sat across from me. Calypso laced her fingers on the table like a teacher at a parent conference.

Leo did his best to impersonate someone capable of being serious. "So, uh, listen, Apollo—"

"I know," I said miserably.

He blinked as if I'd thrown welding sparks in his eyes. "You do?"

"Assuming we live through tomorrow," I said, "you two intend to remain at the Waystation."

They both stared at the table. A little more weeping and pulling of hair might have been nice, some heartfelt sobs of *Please forgive us!* But I guessed that was more apology than Lester Papadopoulos deserved.

"How did you know?" Calypso asked.

"The serious conversations with our hosts?" I said. "The furtive glances?"

"Hey, man," Leo said. "I'm not furtive. I've got zero furtivity."

I turned to Calypso. "Josephine has a wonderful workshop for Leo. And she can teach you to regain your magic. Emmie has gardens worthy of your old home, Ogygia."

"My old *prison*," Calypso corrected, though her voice carried no anger.

Leo fidgeted. "It's just…Josephine reminds me so much of my mom. She needs help around here. The Waystation may be a living building, but it's almost as high-maintenance as Festus."

Calypso nodded. "We've been traveling so much, Apollo, in constant danger for months. It's not just the magic and the gardens that appeal to me. Emmie says we could live like normal young people in this city. Even go to the local high school."

If not for the seriousness in her eyes, I might have laughed. "You—a former immortal even older than I—you want to go to high school?"

"Hey, man," Leo said. "Neither of us has ever had a chance of a normal life."

“We would like to see,” Calypso continued, “what we would be like together, and separately, in the mortal world. Taking things more slowly. Dating. Boyfriend. Girlfriend. Perhaps…hanging out with friends.”

She spoke these words as if they were infused with an exotic spice—a taste she wished to savor.

“The thing is, Lester Man,” Leo said, “we promised to help you. We’re worried about leaving you on your own.”

Their eyes were so full of concern—concern for *me*—that I had to swallow back a lump in my throat. Six weeks we had been traveling together. Most of that time, I had fervently wished I could be anywhere else, with anyone else. But with the exception of my sister, had I ever shared so many experiences with anyone? I realized, gods help me, that I was going to miss these two.

“I understand.” I had to force the words out. “Josephine and Emmie are good people. They can offer you a home. And I won’t be alone. I have Meg now. I don’t intend to lose her again.”

Leo nodded. “Yeah, Meg’s a fireball. Takes one to know one.”

“Besides,” Calypso said, “we won’t…what’s the expression…skip off the radar completely.”

“Drop,” I suggested. “Though skipping sounds more fun.”

“Yeah,” Leo said. “We’ve still got a lot of demigodly stuff to do. At some point, I gotta reconnect with my other peeps: Jason, Piper, Hazel, Frank. Lotta people out there still want to punch me.”

“And we have to survive tomorrow,” Calypso added.

“Right, babe. Good call.” Leo tapped the table in front of me. “Point is, *ese*, we’re not going to abandon you. If you need us, holler. We’ll be there.”

I blinked back tears. I was not sad. I was not overwhelmed by their friendship. No, it had just been a very long day and my nerves were frayed.

“I appreciate it,” I said. “You are both good friends.”

Calypso wiped her eyes. No doubt she was just tired as well. “Let’s not get carried away. You are still hugely annoying.”

“And you are still a pain in the gloutos, Calypso.”

“Okay, then.” She smirked. “Now we all really *should* get some rest. Busy morning ahead.”

“Ugh.” I clawed at my hair. “I don’t suppose you could summon a wind spirit for me? I have to drive to the Cave of Trophonius tomorrow, and I have neither a chariot nor a car.”

“A car?” Leo grinned evilly. “Oh, I can hook you up with one of those!”

31

Start with a C chord
Not all the keys, Meg. C does
Not stand for Chaos

AT 5:00 A.M. the next morning, in the roundabout outside the Waystation, Meg and I found Leo standing in front of a gleaming red Mercedes XLS. I did not ask him how he had procured the vehicle. He did not volunteer the information. He *did* say that we should return it within twenty-four hours (assuming we lived that long) and try not to get pulled over by the police.

The bad news: just outside the city limits, I got pulled over by the police.

Oh, the miserable luck! The officer stopped us for no good reason that I could see. At first I feared he might be a blemmyae, but he was not nearly polite enough.

He frowned at my license. “This is a junior driver’s license from New York, kid. What are you doing driving a car like this? Where are your parents, and where’re you taking this little girl?”

I was tempted to explain that I was a four-thousand-year-old deity with plenty of experience driving the sun, my parents were in the celestial realm, and the little girl was my demigod master.

“She is my—”

“Little sister,” Meg chimed in. “He’s taking me to piano lessons.”

“Uh, yes,” I agreed.

“And we’re late!” Meg waggled her fingers in a way that did not at all resemble playing the piano. “Because my brother is stooo-pid.”

The officer frowned. “Wait here.”

He walked to his patrol car, perhaps to run my license through his computer or to call for SWAT backup.

“Your brother?” I asked Meg. “Piano lessons?”

“The stupid part was true.”

The officer came back with a confused look on his face. “Sorry.” He handed me my license. “My mistake. Drive safely.”

And that was that.

I wondered what had changed the officer’s mind. Perhaps, when Zeus created my license, he had put some sort of spell on the ID that allowed me to pass simple scrutiny such as highway stops. No doubt Zeus had heard that driving while mortal could be dangerous.

We continued on, though the incident left me shaken. On Highway 37, I glanced at every car heading the opposite direction, wondering which were driven by blemmyae, demigods, or mercenaries commuting in to work at Commode Palace, anxious to destroy my friends in time for the naming ceremony.

In the east, the sky lightened from onyx to charcoal. Along the roadside, sodium vapor streetlamps tinted the landscape Agamethus orange—fences and pastures, stands of trees, dry gullies. Occasionally we spotted a gas station or a Starbucks oasis. Every few miles, we passed billboards declaring GOLD: BEST PRICES! with a smiling man who looked suspiciously like King Midas in a cheap suit.

I wondered how Lityerses was doing back at the Waystation. When we’d left, the whole place had been abuzz—everyone pitching in to fix armor, sharpen weapons, and ready traps. Lityerses had stood at Josephine’s side, offering advice about Commodus and his various troops, but he’d seemed only half-present, like a man with a terminal disease, explaining to other patients how best they could prolong the inevitable.

Strangely, I trusted him. I believed he would not betray Josephine and Emmie, little Georgina, and the rest of the ragtag impromptu family I cared about. Lit’s commitment seemed genuine. He now hated Commodus more than any of us.

Then again, six weeks ago, I never would have suspected Meg McCaffrey of working for Nero….

I glanced over at my small master. She slumped in her seat, her red high-tops on the dashboard above the glove compartment. This scrunched-up position didn’t look comfortable to me. It struck me as the sort of habit a child learns, then is reluctant to abandon when they grow too big.

She wriggled her fingers over her knees, still playing air piano.

“You might try putting a few rests in your composition,” I told her. “Just for variety.”

“I want lessons.”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her correctly. “Piano lessons? Now?”

“Not now, dummy. But sometime. Can you teach me?”

What a horrifying idea! I wanted to think I was far enough along in my career as a music god not to give piano lessons to beginners. Then again, I noticed that Meg had *asked* me, not ordered me. I detected something tentative and hopeful in her voice, a fresh green chia shoot emerging. I was reminded of Leo and Calypso last night in the library, talking wistfully of the normal life they might build in Indiana. Strange, how often humans dream about the future. We immortals don’t bother. For us, dreaming of the future is like staring at the hour hand of a clock.

“Very well,” I said. “Assuming we survive this morning’s adventures.”

“Deal.” Meg banged out a final chord that Beethoven would have loved. Then, from her backpack of supplies, she produced a baggie of carrots (peeled by me, thank you very much) and began munching them loudly while knocking the tips of her shoes together.

Because Meg.

“We should talk strategy,” I suggested. “When we get to the caverns, we’ll need to find the secret entrance. I doubt it will be as obvious as the regular mortal entrance.”

“Mm-kay.”

“Once you’ve dispatched whatever guards we find—”

“Once *we* have dispatched them,” she corrected.

“Same difference. We’ll need to look for two nearby streams. We’ll have to drink from both of them before—”

“Don’t tell me.” Meg held up a carrot like a baton. “No spoilers.”

“*Spoilers?* This information might save our lives!”

“I don’t like spoilers,” she insisted. “I want to be surprised.”

“But—”

“No.”

I clenched the wheel. It took great effort not to punch the gas and send us hurtling toward the horizon. I wanted to talk about the Cave of Trophonius…not just to enlighten Meg, but to see if I myself had the details straight.

I’d stayed up most of the night in the Waystation library. I’d read scrolls, sifted through my imperfect memories, even tried to wrangle more answers from the Arrow of Dodona and Agamethus’s Magic 8 Ball. I’d had limited success, but what I’d managed to piece together just made me more nervous.

I liked to talk when I was nervous.

Meg, however, seemed unconcerned by the task ahead of us. She acted as annoying and carefree as she had the first day I’d encountered her in that Manhattan alley.

Was she just putting on a brave act? I didn't think so. I was constantly amazed at how resilient mortals could be in the face of catastrophe. Even the most traumatized, ill-treated, shell-shocked humans could carry on as if things were completely normal. Meals were still prepared. Work was still done. Piano lessons were commenced and carrot sticks munched.

For miles, we rode in silence. I couldn't even play any decent tunes, because the Mercedes did not have satellite radio. Curse Leo Valdez and his free luxury vehicles!

The only FM station I could find featured something called the Morning Zoo. After my experience with Calypso and the griffins, I was in no mood for zoos.

We passed through small towns with run-down motels, secondhand clothing shops, feed stores, and various vehicles for sale on the side of the road. The countryside was flat and monotonous—a landscape that would not have been out of place in the ancient Peloponnese except for the telephone poles and billboards. Well, and the road itself. Greeks were never very good at building roads. That's probably because Hermes was their god of travel. Hermes was always more interested in fascinating, dangerous journeys than he was in quick and easy interstates.

Finally, two hours after leaving Indianapolis, dawn started to break, and I started to panic.

"I'm lost," I admitted.

"Knew it," Meg said.

"It's not my fault! I followed those signs for God's Place!"

Meg squinted at me. "The Christian Bible store we passed? Why'd you do that?"

"Well, honestly! The locals need to be more specific about which gods they're advertising!"

Meg belched into her fist. "Pull over and ask the arrow. I'm getting carsick."

I did not want to ask the arrow. But I also did not want Meg throwing up her carrots all over the leather upholstery. I pulled to the side of the road and dug my prophetic missile weapon from my quiver.

"O, Wise Arrow," I said. "We're lost."

I KNEWST THAT WHEN I MET YOU.

Such a thin shaft the arrow had. How easy it would be to break! I restrained myself. If I destroyed the Grove of Dodona's gift, I worried that its patron, my hippie grandmother, Rhea, might curse me to smell like patchouli for all time.

"What I mean," I said, "is that we need to find the entrance to the Cave of Trophonius. Quickly. Can you direct us there?"

The arrow vibrated, perhaps testing for local Wi-Fi connections. Given our remote location, I feared he might start channeling the Morning Zoo.

THE MORTAL ENTRANCE LIES ONE LEAGUE EAST, he intoned. *NEAR A PORTABLE SHED WITH A ROOF OF BLUE.*

For a moment, I was too surprised to speak. "That…was actually helpful."

BUT THOU CANST NOT USE THE MORTAL ENTRANCE, he added. *'TIS GUARDED TOO WELL, AND 'TWOULD BE DEATH.*

"Ah. Less helpful."

"What's he saying?" Meg asked.

I gestured for her to be patient. (Why, I don't know. It was a hopeless wish.) "Great Arrow, I don't suppose you know how we *should* get into the cave?"

GOEST THOU DOWN THIS ROAD TO THE WEST. THOU SHALT SEEST A ROADSIDE STAND WHICH SELLETH FRESH EGGS.

"Yes?"

THIS ROADSIDE STAND IS NOT IMPORTANT. KEEP DRIVING.

"Apollo?" Meg poked me in the ribs. "What's he saying?"

"Something about fresh eggs."

This answer seemed to satisfy her. At least she stopped poking me.

GOEST THOU FARTHER, the arrow advised. *TAKEST THE THIRD LEFT. WHEN THOU SEEST THE ROAD SIGN OF THE EMPEROR, THOU SHALT KNOW 'TIS TIME TO STOP.*

"What road sign of the emperor?"

THOU SHALT KNOWEST IT WHEN THOU SEEST IT. STOPPEST THERE, JUMPEST THOU THE FENCE, AND PROCEED INLAND TO THE PLACE OF TWO STREAMS.

Cold fingers played an arpeggio down my vertebrae. *The place of two streams*—that, at least, made sense to me. I wished it did not.

"And then?" I asked.

THEN THOU MAYST DRINK AND JUMP INTO THE CHASM OF HORRORS. BUT TO DO SO, THOU MUST FACE THE GUARDIANS THAT CANNOT BE KILLED.

"Fantastic," I said. "I don't supposeth—I don't *suppose* your Wikipedia article has more information about these unkillable guardians?"

THOU DOST JAPE LIKE A JAPING JAPER. BUT NAY. MY PROPHETIC POWERS SEE THIS NOT. AND ONE MORE THING.

"Yes?"

LEAVEST ME IN THE MERCEDES. I WISH NOT TO PLUNGE INTO DEATH AND DARKNESS.

I slid the arrow under the driver's seat. Then I reported the entire

conversation to Meg.

She frowned. “Unkillable guardians? What does that mean?”

“At this point, Meg, your guess is as good as mine. Let’s go find a chasm of horrors to jump into, shall we?”

32

Pretty fuzzy cow
So cute, so warm and vicious!
Squee! Can I kill him?

THE EMPEROR'S road sign was easy enough to spot:

ADOPT-A-HIGHWAY
NEXT FIVE MILES SPONSORED BY:
TRIUMVIRATE HOLDINGS

Commodus and his colleagues may have been power-hungry murderers bent on world domination, but at least they cared about cleaning up litter.

Along the roadside ran a barbed-wire fence. Beyond this lay more nondescript countryside—a few stands of trees and shrubs, but mostly rolling meadows. In the predawn light, dew exhaled a blanket of vapor over the grass. In the distance, behind a clump of hackberry bushes, two large animals stood grazing. I couldn't make out their exact forms. They looked like cows. I doubted they were cows. I spotted no other guardians, killable or otherwise, which did not reassure me in the slightest.

"Well," I told Meg. "Shall we?"

We shouldered our supplies and left the Mercedes.

Meg removed her jacket and laid it across the barbed wire. Despite the arrow's instructions to *jumpest*, we only managed a wobbly giant *steppeth*. I held down the top wire for Meg, then she failed to do the same for me. This left me with some awkward rips in the seat of my jeans.

We sneaked across the field in the direction of the two grazing beasts.

I was sweating an unreasonable amount. The cold morning air condensed on my skin, making me feel as if I were bathing in a cold soup—Apollo gazpacho.

(Hmm, that sounded rather good. I will have to trademark it once I become a god again.)

We crouched behind the hackberries, only twenty or thirty feet from the animals. Dawn tinged the horizon with red.

I didn't know how short our time window would be to enter the cavern. When the spirit of Trophonius said "first light," did he mean nautical twilight? Dawn? The moment when the sun chariot's headlights were first visible, or when the chariot was high enough in the sky that you could actually read my bumper stickers? Whatever the case, we had to hurry.

Meg adjusted her glasses. She started to edge sideways for an unobstructed view around the bushes when one of the creatures lifted its head just enough for me to glimpse its horns.

I stifled a scream. I grabbed Meg's wrist and pulled her back into the cover of the hackberries.

Normally, that might have provoked a bite from her, but I was willing to risk it. It was a little too early in the morning to watch my young friend get killed.

"Stay very still," I whispered. "Those are yales."

She blinked one eye, then the other, as if my warning was slowly making its way from her left brain to her right. "Yales? Isn't that a university?"

"Yes," I murmured. "And one of Yale University's symbols is the yale, but that's not important. These monsters…" I swallowed down the aluminum taste of fear. "The Romans knew them as *centicores*. They are absolutely deadly. They're also attracted to sudden movements and loud noises. So *shh*."

In fact, even as a god, I had never been this close to yales before. They were fierce, proud animals, highly territorial and aggressive. I remembered catching a glimpse of them in my vision of Commodus's throne room, but the beasts were so rare I'd half convinced myself they were some other manner of monster. Also, I could not imagine that even Commodus would be crazy enough to keep yales in such proximity to humans.

They looked more like giant yaks than cows. Shaggy brown fur with yellow spots covered their bodies, while the fur on their heads was solid yellow. Horselike manes trailed down their necks. Their fluffy tails were as long as my arm, and their large amber eyes…Oh, dear. The way I'm describing them, they sound almost cute. Let me assure you, they were not.

The yales' most prominent features were their horns—two glistening white spears of ridged bone, absurdly long for the creature's head. I had seen those horns in action before. Eons ago, during Dionysus's eastern campaign, the wine god had unleashed a herd of yales into the ranks of an Indian army five thousand strong. I remembered the screams of those warriors.

“What do we do?” Meg whispered. “Kill them? They’re kind of pretty.”

“The Spartan warriors were kind of pretty, too, until they skewered you. No, we can’t kill yales.”

“Okay, good.” A long pause, then Meg’s natural rebellious streak kicked in. “Why not? Is their fur invulnerable to my swords? I hate that.”

“No, Meg, I don’t think so. The reason we can’t kill these creatures is that yales are on the endangered-monster list.”

“You’re making that up.”

“Why would I make up such a thing?” I had to remind myself to keep my voice down. “Artemis is very careful about monitoring the situation. When monsters start to fade from mortals’ collective memory, they regenerate less and less often from Tartarus. We have to let them breed and repopulate!”

Meg looked dubious. “Uh-huh.”

“Oh, come on. Surely you heard about that proposed temple of Poseidon in Sicily? It had to be relocated simply because the land was found to be the nesting area of a red-bellied hydra.”

Meg’s blank stare suggested she hadn’t heard about that, even though it had been headline news just a few thousand years ago.

“At any rate,” I persisted, “yales are *much* rarer than red-bellied hydras. I don’t know where Commodus found these, but if we killed them, all the gods would curse us, starting with my sister.”

Meg gazed again at the shaggy animals grazing peacefully in the meadow. “Aren’t you already cursed by the River Styx or whatever?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what do we do?”

The wind shifted. Suddenly, I remembered another detail about yales. They had an excellent sense of smell.

The pair simultaneously lifted their heads and turned their lovely amber eyes in our direction. The bull yale bellowed—a sound like a foghorn gargling mouthwash. Then both monsters charged.

I remembered more interesting facts about yales. (Had I not been about to die, I could have narrated a documentary.) For such large animals, their speed was impressive.

And those horns! As yales attacked, their horns swiveled like insect antennae—or, perhaps more accurately, the lances of medieval knights, who had been so fond of putting these creatures on their heraldic shields. The horns also spun, their sharp ridges corkscrewing, all the better to pierce our bodies.

I wished I could take a video of these majestic animals. I would've gotten millions of likes on GodTube! But if you have ever been charged by two woolly spotted yaks dual-wielding lances on their heads, you understand that camera work in such circumstances is difficult.

Meg tackled me, pushing me out of the yales' path as they rushed through the hackberries. The bull's left horn grazed my calf, slicing through my jeans. (My jeans were having a bad day.)

"Trees!" Meg yelled.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the nearest stand of oaks. Fortunately, the yales were not as fast turning as they were charging. They galloped in a wide arc as Meg and I took cover.

"They're not so pretty now," Meg noted. "You sure we can't kill them?"

"No!" I ran through my limited repertoire of skills. I could sing and play the ukulele, but yales were notoriously tone-deaf. My bow and arrow would do me no good. I could try to simply wound the animals, but with my luck, I'd end up accidentally killing them. I was fresh out of ammonia syringes, brick walls, elephants, and bursts of godly strength. That left only my natural charisma, which I didn't think the yales would appreciate.

The animals slowed as they approached. Probably, they were confused about how to kill us through the trees. Yales were aggressive, but they weren't hunters. They didn't use fancy maneuvers to corner and defeat prey. If somebody got in their territory, they just charged. The trespassers died or fled. Problem solved. They weren't accustomed to intruders who played keep-away.

We edged around the oaks, doing our best to stay opposite the beasts.

"Nice yales," I sang. "Excellent yales."

The yales did not seem impressed.

As we shifted perspective, I spotted something about thirty yards beyond the animals: a cluster of washing-machine-size boulders in the tall grass. Nothing terribly dramatic, but my keen ears picked up the sound of trickling water.

I pointed out the rocks to Meg. "The cave entrance must be there."

She wrinkled her nose. "So do we run for it and jump in?"

"No!" I yelped. "There should be two streams. We have to stop and drink from them. Then the cave itself…I doubt it will be an easy descent. We'll need time to find a safe way down. If we just jump in, we might die."

"These harvards aren't going to give us time."

"Yales," I corrected.

"Same difference," she said, totally stealing my line. "How much do you think those things weigh?"

"A lot."

She seemed to run that through her mental calculator. “Okay. Get ready.”

“For what?”

“No spoilers.”

“I hate you.”

Meg thrust out her hands. All around the yales, the grass went into overdrive, braiding itself into thick green ropes that wrapped around the beasts’ legs. The creatures thrashed and bellowed like gargling foghorns, but the grass continued to grow, climbing across their flanks, entangling their massive bodies.

“Go,” Meg said.

I ran.

Thirty yards had never seemed so far.

Halfway to the rocks, I glanced back. Meg was stumbling, her face glistening with sweat. It must have been taking all her strength to keep the yales entangled. The beasts strained and spun their horns, slashing at the grass, pulling against the sod with all their might.

I reached the pile of rocks.

As I’d suspected, from side-by-side fissures in the face of one boulder, twin springs gurgled, as if Poseidon had come by and cracked the stone with his trident: *I want hot water here, and cold water here.* One spring bubbled diluted white, the color of nonfat milk. The other was as black as squid ink. They ran together in a mossy streak before splattering against the muddy ground.

Beyond the springs, a crevasse zigzagged between the largest boulders—a ten-foot-wide wound in the earth, leaving no doubt as to the presence of the cavern system below. At the lip of the chasm, a coil of rope was tied to an iron piton.

Meg staggered toward me. “Hurry,” she gasped. “Jump in.”

Behind her, the yales were slowly ripping through their grassy bonds.

“We have to drink,” I told her. “Mnemosyne, the Spring of Memory, is black. Lethe, the Spring of Forgetfulness, is white. If we drink both at the same time, they should counteract each other and prepare our minds—”

“Don’t care.” Meg’s face was now as white as the waters of Lethe. “You go.”

“But you have to come with me! The Oracle said so! Besides, you won’t be in any shape to defend yourself.”

“Fine,” she groaned. “Drink!”

I cupped one hand in the water of Mnemosyne, the other hand in the water of Lethe. I gulped them down simultaneously. They had no taste—just intense, numbing cold, the sort that hurts so badly you don’t feel the pain until much later.

My brain began to swivel and corkscrew like a yale horn. My feet felt like

helium balloons. Meg struggled with the rope, trying to wrap it around my waist. For some reason, I found this hysterical.

"Your turn," I giggled. "Drinkie, drinkie!"

Meg scowled. "And lose my wits? Nuh-uh."

"Silly willy! If you don't prepare yourself for the Oracle—"

In the meadow, the yales ripped themselves free, peeling off several square yards of turf from the ground.

"No time!" Meg lunged forward, tackling me around the waist. Like the good friend she was, she sent me tumbling over the ledge and into the black void below.

33

Feeling groovy, I'm
Drowning, freezing, snake surfing
Life is good, Batman!

MEG AND I PLUMMETED through the dark, our rope unspooling as we bounced off one rock then another, my clothing and skin getting brutally scraped away.

I did the natural thing. I screamed, "WHEEEEEE!"

The rope snapped taut, giving me the Heimlich maneuver so violently I almost coughed up my appendix. Meg grunted with surprise and lost her grip on me. She fell deeper into the darkness. A heartbeat later, a splash echoed from below.

I laughed, dangling in the void. "That was fun! Again!"

The knot unraveled at my waist, and I plunged into frigid water.

My delirious state probably saved me from drowning immediately. I felt no need to struggle, thrash, or gasp for breath. I floated down, vaguely amused by my predicament. The sips I had taken from Lethe and Mnemosyne battled in my mind. I couldn't remember my own name, which I found extremely funny, but I could recall with perfect clarity the yellow flecks in Python's serpentine eyes as he sank his fangs into my immortal biceps millennia ago.

Beneath the dark water, I shouldn't have been able to see anything. Nevertheless, images floated in and out of my vision. Perhaps this was the effect of my eyeballs freezing.

I saw my father, Zeus, sitting in a patio chair by an infinity pool at the edge of a terrace. Beyond the pool, an azure sea stretched to the horizon. The scene would have been more fitting for Poseidon, but I knew this place: my mother's condo in Florida. (Yes, I had one of those immortal moms who retired to Florida; what can you do?)

Leto knelt at Zeus's side, her hands clasped in prayer. Her bronze arms

glowed against her white sundress. Her long golden hair zigzagged down her back in an elaborate ladder weave.

"Please, my lord!" she implored. "He is your son. He has learned his lesson!"

"Not yet," Zeus rumbled. "Oh, no. His real test is yet to come."

I laughed and waved. "Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!"

Since I was underwater and most likely hallucinating, my words should not have been audible. Nevertheless, Zeus glanced over and scowled.

The scene evaporated. I found myself facing a different immortal.

Floating before me was a dark goddess, her ebony hair wafting in the cold current, her dress billowing around her like volcanic smoke. Her face was delicate and sublime, her lipstick, eye shadow, and mascara all expertly done in shades of midnight. Her eyes gleamed with absolute hatred.

I found her presence delightful. "Hi, Styx!"

Her obsidian eyes narrowed. "You. Oath-breaker. Do not think I have forgotten."

"But *I* have!" I said. "Who am I again?"

In that moment, I was absolutely serious. I knew this was Styx, goddess of the Underworld's most important river. I knew she was the most powerful of all water nymphs, eldest daughter of the sea Titan, Oceanus. I knew she hated me, which wasn't surprising, since she was also the goddess of hatred.

But I had no idea who I was or what I'd done to earn her animosity.

"Did you know I'm drowning right now?" This was so hilarious I started to giggle a stream of bubbles.

"I will have my due," Styx snarled. "You will PAY for your broken promises."

"Okay!" I agreed. "How much?"

She hissed in annoyance. "I can't even do this with you right now. Return to your foolish quest!"

The goddess vanished. Someone grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, yanked me out of the water, and dumped me on a hard stone surface.

My rescuer was a young girl of about twelve. Water dripped from her tattered green sheath dress. Bloody scratches covered her arms. Her jeans and red high-tops were shellacked with mud.

Most alarmingly, the rhinestones in the corners of her cat-eye glasses were not just glinting. They emitted their own pale light. I realized those small constellations hovering next to her eyes were the only reason I could see the girl at all.

"I feel like I know you," I croaked. "I want to say Peg. Or Megan?"

She frowned, looking almost as dangerous as the goddess Styx. "You're not

kidding, are you?"

"Nope!" I gave her a cheerful smile, despite the fact that I was soaked and shivering. It occurred to me that I was probably going into hypothermic shock. I remembered all the symptoms of that: shivering, dizziness, confusion, rapid heart rate, nausea, fatigue…Wow, I was batting a thousand!

Now if only I could remember my name. It occurred to me that I had two of them. Was one of them Lester? Oh, dear. How awful! The other was something that began with an *A*.

Alfred? Hmm. No. That would make this young girl Batman, and that didn't feel right.

"My name is Meg," she offered.

"Yes! Yes, of course. Thanks. And I'm—"

"An idiot."

"Hmm. No….Oh! That's a joke."

"Not really. But your name is Apollo."

"Right! And we're here for the Oracle of Trophonius."

She tilted her head, sending her left eyeglass frame constellation into a higher astrological house. "You can't remember our names, but you remember *that*?"

"Strange, isn't it?" I struggled to sit up. My fingers had turned blue, which probably wasn't a good sign. "I remember the steps for petitioning the Oracle! First, we drink from the Springs of Lethe and Mnemosyne. I did that already, didn't I? That's why I feel so odd."

"Yeah." Meg wrung the water out of her skirt. "We need to keep moving or we'll freeze to death."

"Okay!" I accepted her help getting me to my feet. "After drinking from the springs, we descend into a cave. Oh! We're here! Then we go farther into the depths. Hmm. That way!"

In fact, there was only one way.

Fifty feet above us, a tiny slash of daylight glowed from the crevice we'd fallen through. The rope dangled well out of reach. We would not be exiting the same way we entered. To our left rose a sheer face of rock. About halfway up the wall, a waterfall gushed from a fissure, spilling into the pool at our feet. To our right, the water formed a dark river and flowed out through a narrow tunnel. The ledge we were standing on wound alongside the river, just wide enough to walk on, assuming we didn't slip, fall in, and drown.

"Well, then!" I led the way, following the stream.

As the tunnel turned, the rock sill narrowed. The ceiling lowered until I was almost crawling. Behind me, Meg breathed in shivering puffs, her exhales so

loud they echoed over the babble of the river.

I found it difficult to walk and form rational thoughts at the same time. It was like playing syncopated rhythms on a drum set. My sticks needed to move in a completely different pattern than my feet on the bass and top hat pedals. One small mistake and my edgy jazz beat would turn into a leaden polka.

I stopped and turned to Meg. “Honey cakes?”

In the glowing rhinestone light of her glasses, her expression was difficult to read. “I hope you’re not calling me that.”

“No, we need honey cakes. Did you bring them or did I?” I patted my soaking wet pockets. I felt nothing but a set of car keys and a wallet. I had a quiver, a bow, and a ukulele on my back—Oh, a ukulele! Wonderful!—but I didn’t think I would have stored pastries in a stringed instrument.

Meg frowned. “You never said anything about honey cakes.”

“But I just remembered! We need them for the snakes!”

“Snakes.” Meg developed a facial tic that I did not think was related to hypothermia. “Why would there be snakes?”

“Good question! I just know we’re supposed to have honey cakes to appease them. So…we forgot the cakes?”

“You never said anything about cakes!”

“Well, that’s a shame. Anything we can substitute? Oreos, perhaps?”

Meg shook her head. “No Oreos.”

“Hmm. Okay. I guess we’ll improvise.”

She glanced apprehensively down the tunnel. “You show me how to improvise with snakes. I’ll follow.”

This sounded like a splendid idea. I strolled merrily onward, except where the tunnel’s ceiling was too low. In those places, I squatted merrily onward.

Despite slipping into the river a few times, whacking my head on a few stalactites, and choking on the acrid smell of bat guano, I felt no distress. My legs seemed to float. My brain wobbled around in my skull, constantly rebalancing like a gyroscope.

Things I could remember: I’d had a vision of Leto. She’d been trying to convince Zeus to forgive me. That was *so* sweet! I’d also had a vision of the goddess Styx. She’d been angry—hilarious! And for some reason, I could remember every note Stevie Ray Vaughan played on “Texas Flood.” What a great song!

Things I could not remember: Didn’t I have a twin sister? Was her name… Lesterina? Alfreda? Neither of those sounded right. Also, why was Zeus mad at me? Also, why was Styx mad at me? Also, who was this girl behind me with the glowing rhinestone glasses, and why didn’t she have any honey cakes?

My thoughts may have been muddled, but my senses were as sharp as ever. From the tunnel ahead of us, wafts of warmer air brushed against my face. The sounds of the river dissipated, the echoes growing deeper and softer, as if the water were spreading out into a larger cavern. A new smell assaulted my nostrils—a scent drier and sourer than bat guano. Ah, yes…reptilian skin and excrement.

I halted. "I know why!"

I grinned at Peggy—Megan—no, *Meg*.

She scowled. "You know why what?"

"Why snakes!" I said. "You asked me why we would find snakes, didn't you? Or was that someone else? Snakes are symbolic! They represent prophetic wisdom from deep in the earth, just as birds symbolize prophetic wisdom from the heavens."

"Uh-huh."

"So snakes are attracted to Oracles! Especially ones in caves!"

"Like that big snake monster we heard in the Labyrinth, Python?"

I found this reference vaguely unsettling. I was pretty sure I'd known who Python was a few minutes ago. Now I was blanking. I flashed on the name Monty Python. Was that correct? I didn't think the monster and I had ever been on a first-name basis.

"Well, yes, I suppose it's like that," I said. "Anyway, the snakes should be right up ahead! That's why we need honey cakes. You have some, you said?"

"No, I—"

"Excellent!" I forged on.

As I'd suspected, the tunnel widened into a large chamber. A lake covered the entire area, perhaps sixty feet in diameter, except for a small island of rock in the center. Above us, the domed ceiling bristled with stalactites like black chandeliers. Covering the island and the surface of the water was a writhing sheet of serpents, like spaghetti left too long in boiling water. Water moccasins. Lovely creatures. Thousands of them.

"Ta-da!" I exclaimed.

Meg did not seem to share my enthusiasm. She edged back into the tunnel. "Apollo…you'd need a zillion honey cakes for that many snakes."

"Oh, but you see, we need to get to that little island in the center. That's where we'll receive our prophecy."

"But if we go into that water, won't the snakes kill us?"

"Probably!" I grinned. "Let's find out!"

I jumped into the lake.

34

Meg takes a solo
Scares away her audience
Good job, McCaffrey

“APOLLO, SING!” MEG YELLED.

No words could have stopped me more effectively. I loved being asked to sing!

I was halfway across the lake, up to my waist in reptilian noodle soup, but I turned and looked back at the girl standing at the mouth of the tunnel. I must have agitated the snakes in my wake. They swished back and forth, their cute little heads gliding just above the surface, their white mouths open. (Oh, I get it! That’s why they were called cottonmouths!)

Many of the snakes swarmed toward Meg, nosing around her shoes as if deciding whether to join her on the ledge. Meg tiptoed from foot to foot as if she wasn’t crazy about this idea.

“Did you say *sing*?” I asked.

“Yes!” Her voice squeaked. “Charm the snakes! Make them go away!”

I didn’t understand what she meant. When I sang, my audiences always came *closer*. Who was this girl Meg, anyway? She had apparently confused me with Saint Patrick. (Nice guy, by the way; terrible singing voice. The legends don’t normally mention that he drove the snakes out of Ireland with his hideous version of “Te Deum.”)

“Sing that song you did in the ants’ nest!” she pleaded.

The Ants’ Nest? I remembered singing with the Rat Pack and A Flock of Seagulls, but the Ants’ Nest? I didn’t recall ever being part of such a group.

However, it did occur to me why Megan/Peg/Meg might be nervous. Water moccasins are poisonous. Much like yales, they can be aggressive when their territory is invaded. But Meg stood at the mouth of the tunnel, not really in the snakes’ territory. Why was she nervous?

I looked down. Hundreds of vipers swirled around me, displaying their cute little mouths with their sharp little fangs. They moved sluggishly in the frigid water, or perhaps they were just awestruck to be in my presence—cheerful, charismatic, charming old Whatever-my-name-was!—but they did seem to be hissing a lot.

"Oh!" I laughed as the realization struck me. "You're worried about me! I'm about to die!"

I had a vague impulse to do something. Run? Dance? What was it Meg had suggested?

Before I could decide, Meg began to sing.

Her voice was weak and off-key, but I recognized the melody. I was pretty sure I had composed it.

Whenever someone bursts into song in public, there is a moment of hesitation. Passersby stop to listen, trying to discern what they are hearing and why a random person in their midst has decided to serenade them. As Meg's uneven voice echoed through the cavern, the snakes sensed the vibrations. More thumb-size viper heads popped to the surface. More white mouths opened, as if they were trying to taste the song. Around my waist, the swirling storm of water moccasins lost its cohesion as the snakes turned their attention to Meg.

She sang of loss and regret. Yes…I vaguely recalled singing this song. I'd been walking through the tunnels of a myrmekes' nest, pouring out my sadness, baring my heart as I searched for Meg. In the song, I had taken responsibility for the deaths of my greatest loves, Daphne and Hyacinthus. Their names came back to me as sharp as broken window shards.

Meg repeated my performance, but with different words. She was making up her own verses. As the vipers gathered at her feet, her voice grew stronger, more self-assured. She was still off-key, but she sang with heartbreaking conviction—her song every bit as sad and genuine as mine had been.

"It's my fault," she sang. "Your blood on my hands. The crushed rose I couldn't save."

I was stunned she had such poetry in her. Clearly, the snakes were too. They bobbed around her feet in a thick mass, just like the crowd at the Pink Floyd floating concert in Venice in 1989—which, for some reason, I remembered perfectly.

A bit late, I realized it was a miracle I had not yet been bitten to death by water moccasins. What was I doing in the middle of this lake? Only Meg's music was keeping me alive—her discordant voice somehow beautiful and enchanting, holding the attention of thousands of rapt vipers.

Like them, I wanted to stay where I was and listen. But a sense of unease

was building up inside me. This cave…the Oracle of Trophonius. Something told me this cave was not the right place to bare one's soul.

"Meg," I whispered. "Stop."

She apparently couldn't hear me.

The entire cavern seemed fixated on her voice now. The rock walls glistened. Shadows swayed as if dancing. The glittering stalactites strained toward Meg like compass needles.

She sang of betraying me, of returning to Nero's household, of succumbing to her fear of the Beast….

"No," I said, a little louder. "No, Meg!"

Too late. The cavern's magic caught her song, magnifying her voice a hundredfold. The chamber filled with the sound of pure pain. The lake boiled as panicked serpents submerged and fled, pushing past my legs in a strong riptide.

Perhaps they escaped down some hidden waterway. Perhaps they dissolved. All I knew: the little rock island in the center of the cave was suddenly empty, and I was the only living thing left in the lake.

Still Meg sang. Her voice now sounded forced out of her—as if some giant invisible fist were squeezing her like a squeaky toy. Lights and shadows flickered over the cavern walls, forming ghostly images to illustrate her lyrics.

In one scene, a middle-aged man crouched down and smiled as if looking at a child. He had dark curly hair like mine (I mean Lester's), a broad freckled nose, and soft, kind eyes. He held out a single red rose.

"From your mother," he whispered, a chorus to Meg's song. "This rose will never fade, sweetheart. You will never have to worry about thorns."

The pudgy hand of a child appeared in the vision, reaching for the flower. I suspected this was one of Meg's earliest memories—something just on the edge of consciousness. She took the rose, and the petals unfolded into brilliant full bloom. The stem curled lovingly around Meg's wrist. She squealed with delight.

A different vision: the emperor Nero in his purple three-piece suit, kneeling to look Meg in the eye. He smiled in a way that might have been mistaken for kindly if you didn't know Nero. His double chin puffed out under his helmet-strap beard. His bejeweled rings glittered on his fat fingers.

"You'll be a good girl, won't you?" He gripped Meg's shoulder a little too tightly. "Your daddy had to go away. Perhaps if you're good, you'll see him again. Won't that be nice?"

The younger version of Meg nodded. I sensed, somehow, that she was about five years old. I imagined her thoughts and emotions curling up inside her, forming a thick protective shell.

Another scene flickered into view. Just outside the New York Public Library

in Midtown, a man's corpse sprawled on the white marble steps. One hand was splayed on his gut, which was a gruesome battleground of red trenches—perhaps slashes from a knife, or the claws of a large predator.

Police milled around, taking notes, snapping photos, holding the crowd behind a line of yellow tape. They parted, however, to let two people in—Nero, in a different purple suit but the same ghastly beard and jewelry, and Meg, now maybe six, horrified, pale, reluctant. She saw the body and began to whimper. She tried to turn away, but Nero planted a heavy hand on her shoulder to keep her in place.

"I want you to see this." His voice dripped with false sympathy. "I am so sorry, my dear. The Beast…" He sighed as if this tragic scene was unavoidable. "I need you to be more diligent in your studies, do you understand? Whatever the swords-master says, you must do. It would break my heart if something else happened, something even worse than this. Look. Remember."

Tears pooled in Meg's eyes. She edged forward. Clutched in her dead father's other hand was the stem of a rose. The crushed petals were strewn across his stomach, almost invisible against the blood. She wailed, "Daddy! Help me!" The police paid her no attention. The crowd acted as if she didn't exist. Only Nero was there for her.

At last she turned to him, buried her face in his suit vest, and sobbed uncontrollably.

Shadows flickered more rapidly across the cavern walls. Meg's song began to reverberate, breaking into random waves of noise. The lake churned around me. On the small rock island, darkness gathered, swirling upward like a waterspout, forming the shape of a man.

"Meg, stop singing!" I yelled.

With one final sob, she crumpled to her knees, her face streaked with tears. She fell to her side, groaning, her voice like crumpling sandpaper. The rhinestones in her glasses still glowed, but with a faint bluish tint, as if all the warmth had been drained from them.

I wanted more than anything to rush to Meg's side. The sips of Memory and Forgetfulness had mostly burned out of my system. I knew Meg McCaffrey. I wanted to comfort her. But I also knew that the danger to her had not passed.

I faced the island. The apparition was only vaguely humanoid, composed of shadows and fractals of light. Afterimages from Meg's lyrics flashed and faded in his body. He radiated fear even more strongly than Thalia's Aegis shield—waves of terror that threatened to rip my self-control from its moorings.

"Trophonius!" I yelled. "Leave her alone!"

His form came into clearer focus: his lustrous dark hair, his proud face.

Around him swarmed a host of phantom bees, his sacred creatures, small smudges of darkness.

"Apollo." His voice resonated deep and harsh, just as it had sounded when expelled from Georgina on the Throne of Memory. "I've waited a long time, Father."

"Please, my son." I clasped my hands. "Meg is not your petitioner. I am!"

Trophonius regarded young McCaffrey, now curled up and shivering on the stone ledge. "If she is not my petitioner, why did she summon me with her song of grief? She has many unanswered questions. I could answer them, for the price of her sanity."

"No! She was—She was trying to protect me." I choked on the words. "She is my friend. She did not drink from the springs. *I* did. *I* am the supplicant to your holy Oracle. Take me instead!"

Trophonius's laughter was a horrible sound…worthy of a spirit who dwelled in the darkness with thousands of poisonous snakes.

"Take me instead," he repeated. "The very prayer I made when my brother Agamethus was caught in a tunnel, his chest crushed, his life fading. Did you listen to me then, Father?"

My mouth turned dry. "Don't punish the girl for what I did."

Trophonius's ghostly bees swarmed in a wider cloud, buzzing angrily past my face.

"Do you know how long I wandered the mortal world after killing my brother, Apollo?" asked the ghost. "After cutting off his head, my hands still covered in his blood, I staggered through the wilderness for weeks, months. I pleaded to the earth to swallow me up and end my misery. I got half my wish."

He gestured around him. "I dwell in darkness now because I am *your son.* I see the future because I am *your son.* All my pain and madness…Why should I not share it with those who seek my help? Does *your* help ever come without a price?"

My legs gave out. I plunged to my knees, the frigid water up to my chin. "Please, Trophonius. I am mortal now. Take your price from me, not her!"

"The girl has already volunteered! She opened her deepest fears and regrets to me."

"No! No, she didn't drink of the two springs. Her mind is not prepared. She will die!"

Images flickered through Trophonius's dark form like flashes of lightning: Meg encased in goo in the ants' lair; Meg standing between me and Lityerses, his sword stopped cold by her crossed golden blades; Meg hugging me fiercely as we flew our griffin from the Indianapolis Zoo.

“She is precious to you,” said the Oracle. “Would you give your life in exchange for hers?”

I had trouble processing that question. Give up my life? At any point in my four thousand years of existence, my answer would’ve been an emphatic *No! Are you crazy?* One should *never* give up one’s life. One’s life is important! The whole point of my quests in the mortal world, finding and securing all these ancient Oracles, was to regain immortality so I wouldn’t have to ponder such awful questions!

And yet…I thought of Emmie and Josephine renouncing immortality for each other. I thought of Calypso giving up her home, her powers, and eternal life for a chance to roam the world, experience love, and possibly enjoy the wonders of high school in Indiana.

“Yes,” I found myself saying. “Yes, I would die to save Meg McCaffrey.”

Trophonius laughed—a wet, angry sound like the churning of vipers in water. “Very good! Then promise me that you’ll grant me a wish. Whatever I ask, you will do.”

“Y-your wish?” I wasn’t a god anymore. Trophonius knew that. Even if I *could* grant wishes, I seemed to recall a very recent conversation with the goddess Styx about the dangers of making oaths I couldn’t keep.

But what choice did I have?

“Yes,” I said. “I swear. Whatever you ask. Then we have an agreement? You will take me instead of the girl?”

“Oh, I didn’t promise anything in return!” The spirit turned as black as oil smoke. “I just wanted to exact that promise from you. The girl’s fate is already decided.”

He stretched out his arms, expelling millions of dark ghostly bees.

Meg screamed in terror as the swarm engulfed her.

35

Man, I hate my son
A real arrogant jerkwad
Nothing like his dad

I DID NOT KNOW I could move so fast. Not as Lester Papadopoulos, anyway.

I bounded across the lake until I reached Meg's side. I tried desperately to shoo away the bees, but the wisps of darkness swarmed her, flying into her mouth, nose, and ears—even into her tear ducts. As a god of medicine, I would have found that fascinating if I hadn't been so repulsed.

"Trophonius, stop it!" I pleaded.

"This is not my doing," said the spirit. "Your friend opened her mind to the Dark Oracle. She asked questions. Now she is receiving the answers."

"She asked no questions!"

"Oh, but she did. Mostly about you, Father. What will happen to you? Where must you go? How can she help you? These worries are foremost in her mind. Such misplaced loyalty…"

Meg began to thrash. I turned her onto her side, as one should do for someone after having a seizure. I wracked my brain. What else? Remove sharp objects from her environment….All the snakes were gone, good. Not much I could do about the bees. Her skin was cold, but I had nothing warm and dry to cover her with. Her usual scent—that faint, inexplicable smell of apples—had turned dank as mildew. The rhinestones in her glasses were completely dark, the lenses white with condensation.

"Meg," I said. "Stay with me. Concentrate on my voice."

She muttered incoherently. With a twinge of panic, I realized that if she gave me a direct order in her delirious state, even something as simple as *Leave me alone* or *Go away*, I would be compelled to obey. I had to find a way to anchor her mind, to shield her from the worst of the dark visions. That was difficult when my own mind was still a little fuzzy and not completely trustworthy.

I muttered some healing chants—old curative tunes I hadn't used in centuries. Before antibiotics, before aspirin, before even sterile bandages, we had songs. I was the god of both music and healing for good reason. One should never underestimate the healing power of music.

Meg's breathing steadied, but the shadowy swarm still enveloped her, attracted to her fears and doubts like…well, like bees to pollen.

"Ahem," Trophonius said. "So about this favor you promised—"

"Shut up!" I snapped.

In her fever, Meg murmured, "Shut up."

I chose to take this as an echo, not an order, aimed at Trophonius rather than me. Thankfully, my vocal cords agreed.

I sang to Meg about her mother, Demeter—the goddess who could heal the entire earth after drought, fire, or flood. I sang of Demeter's mercy and kindness—the way she had made the prince Triptolemus into a god because of his good deeds; the way she had nursed the baby boy Demophon for three nights, attempting to make him immortal; the way she had blessed the cereal makers of modern times, flooding the world with a bounty of Froot Loops, Lucky Charms, and Count Chocula. Truly, she was a goddess of infinite benevolence.

"You know she loves you," I promised, cradling Meg's head in my lap. "She loves all her children. Look at how much she cherished Persephone even though that girl…Well, she makes your table manners look positively refined! Er, no offense."

I realized I wasn't even singing anymore. I was rambling, trying to drive off Meg's fears with a friendly voice.

"Once," I continued, "Demeter married this minor harvest god, Karmanor? You've probably never heard of him. No one had. He was this local deity in Crete. Rude, backward, poorly dressed. But, oh, they loved each other. They had this son…ugliest boy you ever saw. Had *no* redeeming qualities. He looked like a pig. Everyone said so. He even had a horrible name: Eubouleus. Sounds like Ebola, I know. But Demeter turned everyone's criticisms around. She made Eubouleus the god of swineherds! I only say this because…Well, you never know, Meg. Demeter has plans for you, I'm sure. You can't die on me, you see. You have too much to look forward to. Demeter might make you the minor goddess of cute little piglets!"

I couldn't tell if she was hearing me. Her eyes shifted under closed lids as if she'd entered REM sleep. She wasn't twitching and thrashing quite as much. Or was that my imagination? I was shaking from cold and fear so much myself, it was hard to be sure.

Trophonius made a sound like a steam valve opening. "She's just fallen into

a deeper trance. That's not necessarily a good sign. She could still die."

I kept my back to him. "Meg, don't listen to Trophonius. He's all about fear and pain. He's just trying to make us lose hope."

"Hope," said the spirit. "Interesting word. I had hope once—that my father might act like *a father*. I got over it after a few centuries of being dead."

"Don't blame me for you robbing the king's treasury!" I snarled. "You are here because *you* messed up."

"I prayed to you!"

"Well, perhaps you didn't pray for the right thing at the right time!" I yelled. "Pray for wisdom before you do something stupid! Don't pray for me to bail you out after you follow your worst instincts!"

The bees swirled around me and buzzed angrily, but they did me no harm. I refused to offer them any fear to feed on. All that mattered now was staying positive, staying anchored for Meg's sake.

"I'm here." I brushed the wet hair from her forehead. "You are not alone."

She whimpered in her trance. "The rose died."

I felt as if a water moccasin had wriggled into my chest and was biting my heart, one artery at a time. "Meg, a flower is only part of the plant. Flowers grow back. You have deep roots. You have strong stems. You have…Your face is green." I turned to Trophonius in alarm. "Why is her face green?"

"Interesting." He sounded anything but interested. "Perhaps she's dying."

He tilted his head as if listening to something in the distance. "Ah. They're here, waiting for you."

"What? Who?"

"The emperor's servants. Blemmyae." Trophonius gestured to the far side of the lake. "An underwater tunnel just there…it leads into the rest of the cavern system, the part known to mortals. The blemmyae have learned better than to come into this chamber, but they're waiting for you on the other end. That's the only way you can escape."

"Then we will."

"Doubtful," said Trophonius. "Even if your young friend survives, the blemmyae are preparing explosives."

"WHAT?"

"Oh, Commodus probably told them to use the explosives only as a last resort. He likes having me as his personal fortune-teller. He sends his men in here from time to time, pulls them out half-dead and insane, gets free glimpses of the future. What does he care? But he'd rather destroy this Oracle than allow you to escape alive."

I was too dumbfounded to respond.

Trophonius let loose another harsh peal of laughter. “Don’t look so down, Apollo. On the bright side, it won’t matter if Meg dies here, because she’s going to die anyway! Look, she’s frothing at the mouth now. This is always the most interesting part.”

Meg was indeed gurgling white foam. In my expert medical opinion, that was rarely a good sign.

I took her face between my hands. “Meg, listen to me.” The darkness roiled around her, making my skin tingle. “I’m here. I’m Apollo, god of healing. You will *not* die on me.”

Meg didn’t take orders well. I knew this. She twitched and foamed, coughing up random words like *horse*, *crossword*, *cloven*, *roots*. Also not a great sign, medically speaking.

My singing had not worked. Stern language had not worked. There was only one other remedy I could think of—an ancient technique for drawing out poison and evil spirits. The practice was no longer endorsed by most medical associations, but I remembered the limerick from the Grove of Dodona, the line I had lost the most sleep over: *Was forced death and madness to swallow.*

Here we were.

I knelt over Meg’s face, as I used to do when I taught mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as part of first aid training at Camp Jupiter. (Those silly Roman demigods were *always* drowning.)

“I’m sorry about this.” I pinched Meg’s nose and clamped my mouth over hers. A slimy, unpleasant sensation—much like what I imagined Poseidon experienced when he realized he was kissing the gorgon Medusa.

I could not be deterred. Instead of exhaling, I inhaled, sucking the darkness from Meg’s lungs.

Perhaps, at some point in your life, you’ve gotten water up your nose? Imagine that feeling, except with bee venom and acid instead of water. The pain almost made me black out, a noxious cloud of horror flooding through my sinuses, down my throat, and into my chest. I felt ghostly bees ricocheting through my respiratory system, trying to sting their way out.

I held my breath, determined to keep as much of the darkness away from Meg for as long as I could. I would share this burden with her, even if it killed me.

My mind slid sideways into Meg’s own memories.

I was a frightened little girl, trembling on the steps of the library, staring down at the body of my murdered father.

The rose he had given me was crushed and dead. Its petals were scattered across the wounds the Beast had made in his belly.

The Beast had done this. I had no doubt. Nero had warned me again and again.

Daddy had promised me the rose would never die. I would never have to worry about thorns. He said the flower was a gift from my mother, a lady I had never met.

But the rose was dead. Daddy was dead. My life was nothing but thorns.

Nero put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Meg.”

His eyes were sad, but his voice was tinged with disappointment. This only proved what I already suspected. Daddy’s death was my fault. I should have been a better daughter. I should have trained harder, minded my manners, not objected when Nero told me to fight the larger children…or the animals I did not want to kill.

I had upset the Beast.

I sobbed, hating myself. Nero hugged me. I buried my face in his purple clothes, his sickly sweet cologne—not like flowers, but like old, desiccated potpourri in a nursing home. I wasn’t sure how I even *knew* that smell, but it brought back a half-remembered feeling of helplessness and terror. Nero was all I had. I didn’t get real flowers, a real father, a real mother. I wasn’t worthy of that. I had to cling to what I had.

Then, our minds comingled, Meg and I plunged into primordial Chaos—the miasma from which the Fates wove the future, making destiny out of randomness.

No one’s mind should be exposed to such power. Even as a god, I feared to go too near the boundaries of Chaos.

It was the same sort of danger mortals risked when they asked to see a god’s true form—a burning, terrible pyre of pure possibility. Seeing such a thing could vaporize humans, turn them into salt or dust.

I shielded Meg from the miasma as best I could, wrapping my mind around hers in a sort of embrace, but we both heard the piercing voices.

Swift white horse, they whispered. *The crossword speaker. Lands of scorching death.*

And more—lines spoken too fast, overlapping too much to make sense of. My eyes began to bake. The bees consumed my lungs. Still I held my breath. I saw a misty river in the distance—the Styx itself. The dark goddess beckoned me from the shore, inviting me to cross. I would be immortal again, if only in the way human souls were immortal after death. I could pass into the Fields of Punishment. Didn’t I deserve to be punished for my many crimes?

Unfortunately, Meg felt the same way. Guilt weighed her down. She did not believe she deserved to survive.

What saved us was a simultaneous thought:

I cannot give up. Apollo/Meg needs me.

I endured for another moment, then two. At last, I could stand it no more.

I exhaled, expelling the poison of the prophecy. Gasping for fresh air, I collapsed next to Meg on the cold, wet stone. Slowly, the world returned to a solid state. The voices were gone. The cloud of ghostly bees had vanished.

I rose to my elbows. I pressed my fingers against Meg's neck. Her pulse pattered, thready and weak, but she was not dead.

"Thank the Three Fates," I murmured.

For once, I actually meant it. If Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos had been in front of me right then, I would have kissed their warty noses.

On his island, Trophonius sighed. "Oh, well. The girl might still be insane for the rest of her life. That's some consolation."

I glared at my deceased son. "Some *consolation*?"

"Yes." He tilted his ethereal head, listening again. "You'd best hurry. You'll have to carry the girl through the underwater tunnel, so I suppose you might both drown. Or the blemmyae might kill you at the other end. But if not, I want that favor."

I laughed. After my plunge into Chaos, it wasn't a pretty sound. "You expect a *favor*? For attacking a defenseless girl?"

"For giving you your prophecy," Trophonius corrected. "It's yours, assuming you can extract it from the girl on the Throne of Memory. Now my favor, as you promised: Destroy this cave."

I had to admit…I'd just come back from the miasma of pure prophecy, and I *still* didn't see that request coming. "Say what, now?"

"This location is too exposed," said Trophonius. "Your allies at the Waystation will never be able to defend it from the Triumvirate. The emperors will just keep attacking. I do not wish to be used by Commodus anymore. Better that the Oracle is destroyed."

I wondered if Zeus would agree. I had been operating under the assumption that my father wanted me to *restore* all the ancient Oracles before I could regain my godhood. I wasn't sure if destroying the Cavern of Trophonius would be an acceptable plan B. Then again, if Zeus wanted things done in a certain way, he should've given me instructions in writing. "But, Trophonius…what will happen to you?"

Trophonius shrugged. "Perhaps my Oracle will reappear somewhere else in a few centuries—under better circumstances, in a more secure location. Maybe that will give you time to become a nicer father."

He was definitely making it easier to consider his request. "How do I destroy

this place?”

“I may have mentioned the blemmyae with explosives in the next cave? If they do not use them, you must.”

“And Agamethus? Will he disappear as well?”

Dim flashes of light erupted from within the spirit’s form—perhaps sadness?

“Eventually,” said Trophonius. “Tell Agamethus…Tell him I love him, and I’m sorry this has been our fate. That’s more than I ever got from you.”

His swirling column of darkness began to unspool.

“Wait!” I yelled. “What about Georgina? Where did Agamethus find her? Is she my child?”

The laughter of Trophonius echoed weakly through the cavern. “Ah, yes. Consider that mystery my last gift to you, Father. I hope it drives you insane!”

Then he was gone.

For a moment, I sat on the ledge, stunned and devastated. I didn’t feel physically hurt, but I realized it was possible to suffer a thousand bites in this snake pit, even if none of the vipers came near you. There were other kinds of poison.

The cave rumbled, sending ripples across the lake. I didn’t know what that meant, but we could not stay here. I lifted Meg in my arms and waded into the water.

36

Mind your p's and q's
When you are arming bombs or—
SPLAT—trample jelly

I MAY HAVE MENTIONED: I am not the god of the sea.

I have many fascinating abilities. In my divine state, I am good at nearly everything I attempt. But as Lester Papadopoulos, I was *not* the master of one-armed swimming underwater while encumbered, nor could I go without oxygen any longer than a normal mortal.

I clawed my way through the passage, hugging Meg close, my lungs burning in outrage.

First you fill us with dark prophetic bees! my lungs screamed at me. *Now you force us to stay underwater! You are a horrible person!*

I could only hope Meg would survive the experience. Since she was still unconscious, I couldn't very well warn her to hold her breath. The best I could do was make our journey as brief as possible.

At least the current was in my favor. The water pushed me in the direction I wanted to go, but after six or seven seconds I was pretty sure we were going to die.

My ears throbbed. I groped blindly for handholds on the slick rock walls. I was probably destroying my fingertips, but the cold rendered my nervous system useless. The only pain I felt was inside my chest and head.

My mind began to play tricks on me as it sought more oxygen.

You can breathe underwater! it said. *Go ahead. It'll be fine!*

I was about to inhale the river when I noticed a faint green glow above me. Air? Radiation? Limeade? Any of those sounded better than drowning in the dark. I kicked upward.

I expected to be surrounded by enemies when I surfaced, so I tried to emerge with as little gasping and flailing as possible. I made sure Meg's head was above

water, then gave her a quick abdominal thrust to expel any fluid from her lungs. (That's what friends are for.)

Doing all this quietly was no easy task, but as soon as I took in our surroundings, I was glad to be such a ninja of soft gasping and flailing.

This cave was not much larger than the one we had left. Electric lamps hung from the ceiling, casting green streaks of light across the water. Along the opposite side of the cave, a boat dock was lined with boxy aluminum barges—for touring the mortally accessible areas of the subterranean river, I assumed. On the dock, three blemmyae crouched over a large object that looked like two scuba tanks duct-taped together, the cracks stuffed with wads of putty and lots of wires.

Had Leo Valdez made such a contraption, it could have been anything from a robotic butler to a jet pack. Given the blemmyae's lack of creativity, I came to the depressing conclusion that they were arming a bomb.

The only reasons they had not noticed and killed us already were 1) they were busy arguing, and 2) they were not looking in our direction. Blemmyae's peripheral vision consists entirely of their own armpits, so they tend to focus straight ahead.

One blemmyae was dressed in dark green slacks and an open green dress shirt—a park ranger's outfit, perhaps? The second wore the blue uniform of an Indiana State Trooper. The third…Oh, dear. She wore a very familiar-looking flowery dress.

"No, sirree!" the trooper yelled as politely as possible. "That is *not* where the red wire goes, thank you very much."

"You're welcome," said the ranger. "But I studied the diagram. It does go there, you see, because the blue wire has to go *here*. And if you'll excuse me for saying so, you're an idiot."

"You're excused," the trooper said amiably, "but only because *you're* an idiot."

"Now, boys," said the woman. Her voice was definitely that of Nanette, the woman who had welcomed us on our first day in Indianapolis. It seemed impossible that she should have regenerated from Tartarus so soon after being killed by Josephine's crossbow turret, but I put this down to my usual wretched luck. "Let's not argue. We can just call the customer-support line and—"

Meg took this opportunity to gasp, much louder than I had. We had no place to hide except underwater, and I wasn't in any shape to submerge again.

Nanette spotted us. Her chest-face twisted in a smile, her heavy orange lipstick glistening like mud in the green light.

"Well, lookee here! Visitors!"

The ranger unsheathed a hunting knife. The trooper drew his gun. Even with his species' bad depth perception, he wasn't likely to miss us at such close range.

Helpless in the water, holding a gasping, half-conscious Meg, I did the only thing I could think of. I yelled, "Don't kill us!"

Nanette chuckled. "Now, honey, why shouldn't we kill you?"

I glanced at the scuba-tank bomb. No doubt Leo Valdez would know exactly what to do in a situation like this, but the only advice I could think of was something Calypso had told me at the zoo: *Half of magic is acting like it will work. The other half is picking a superstitious mark.*

"You should not kill me," I announced, "because I know where the red wire goes!"

The blemmyae muttered among themselves. They may have been immune to charm and music, but they shared mortals' reluctance for either reading instructions or calling customer support. Their hesitation gave me a moment to slap Meg (*gently* on the cheek, simply to help her wake up).

She spluttered and twitched, which was an improvement over being passed out cold. I scanned the cave for possible escape routes. To our right, the river wound through a low-ceilinged tunnel. I was not anxious to swim through these caves any longer. To our left, at the edge of the boat dock, a ramp with railings led upward. That would be the exit to the surface, I decided.

Unfortunately, standing in our way were three superstrong humanoids with an explosive device.

The blemmyae concluded their conference.

Nanette faced me again. "Very well! Please tell us where the red wire goes. Then we will kill you as painlessly as possible, and we can all go home happy."

"A generous offer," I said. "But I really need to *show* you. It's too hard to explain from way over here. Permission to come ashore?"

The trooper lowered his gun. A bushy mustache covered the width of his lowest rib. "Well, he asked permission. That was polite."

"Hmm." Nanette stroked her chin, simultaneously scratching her belly. "Permission granted."

Joining three enemies on the dock was only marginally better than freezing in the river, but I was glad to get Meg out of the water.

"Thank you," I told the blemmyae after they hauled us up.

"You're welcome," all three said in unison.

"Just let me put my friend down…." I stumbled toward the ramp, wondering if I could make a break for it.

"That's far enough," Nanette warned, "please and thank you."

There were no ancient Greek words for *I hate you, scary clown-woman*, but I

muttered a close approximation under my breath. I propped Meg against the wall. “Can you hear me?” I whispered.

Her lips were the color of blueberries. Her teeth chattered. Her eyes rolled back in her head, showing the bloodshot whites of her eyes.

“Meg, please,” I said. “I will distract the blemmyae, but you need to get out of here. Can you walk? Crawl? Anything?”

“Hum-um-um.” Meg shivered and gasped. “Shumma-shumma.”

This was no language that I knew, but I inferred that Meg would not be going anywhere on her own. I would have to do more than just distract the blemmyae.

“All righty, then!” Nanette said. “Please show us what you know, so we can bring down this cave on top of you!”

I forced a smile. “Of course. Now, let’s see….”

I knelt next to the device. It was sadly uncomplicated. There were, in fact, only two wires and two receptors, both color-coded blue and red.

I glanced up. “Ah. Quick question. I am aware that blemmyae are tone-deaf, but—”

“That’s not true!” The ranger looked offended. “I don’t even know what that means!”

The other two bowed emphatically—the blemmyae equivalent of nodding.

“I enjoy all tones,” Nanette agreed.

“Explosions,” the trooper said. “Gunshots. Car engines. All tones are good.”

“I stand corrected,” I said. “But my question was…could it be possible that your species is also color-blind?”

They looked dumbfounded. I examined Nanette’s makeup, dress, and shoes once again, and it became clear to me why so many blemmyae preferred to disguise themselves in mortal uniforms. *Of course* they were color-blind.

For the record, I am *not* implying that color blindness or tone deafness indicate any lack of creativity or intelligence. Far from it! Some of my favorite creative people, from Mark Twain to Mister Rogers to William Butler Yeats, had these conditions.

In blemmyae, however, sensory limitations and dull thinking seemed to be part of the same depressing package.

“Forget it,” I said. “Let’s get started. Nanette, would you please pick up the red wire?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely.” Nanette leaned in and picked the blue wire.

“The other red wire,” I advised.

“Of course. I knew that!”

She took the red wire.

“Now attach it to the red—to *this* receptor.” I pointed.

Nanette did as I instructed.

“There you are!” I said.

Clearly still perplexed, the blemmyae stared at the device.

The trooper said, “But there’s another wire.”

“Yes,” I said patiently. “It goes to the second receptor. However”—I grabbed Nanette’s hand before she could blow us all up—“once you connect it, you will most likely activate the bomb. Do you see this small screen here? I am no Hephaestus, but I assume this is the timer. Do you happen to know what the default countdown is?”

The trooper and ranger conferred in the guttural, monotone language of the blemmyae—which sounded like two busted power sanders speaking in Morse code. I glanced over at Meg, who was right where I’d left her, still shivering and muttering *shumma-shumma* under her breath.

The ranger smiled in a self-satisfied way. “Well, sir. Since I’m the only one who read the diagram, I’ve decided I can safely give you the answer. The default time is five seconds.”

“Ah.” A few phantom bees crawled up my throat. “So once you connect the wire, there will be virtually no time to exit the cave before the bomb goes off.”

“Exactly!” Nanette beamed. “The emperor was very clear. If Apollo and the child make it out of the Oracle chamber, kill them and bring down the cavern in a mighty explosion!”

The trooper frowned. “No, he said to kill them *with* the mighty explosion.”

“No, sirree,” said the ranger. “He said to use the mighty explosion only if we had to. We could kill these two if they appeared, but if they didn’t…” He scratched his shoulder hair. “I’m confused now. What was the bomb for?”

I said a silent prayer of thanks that Commodus had sent blemmyae and not Germani to do this job. Of course, that probably meant the Germani were fighting my friends at the Waystation right now, but I could only handle one earth-shattering crisis at a time.

“Friends,” I said. “Frenemies, blemmyae. My point is this: if you activate the bomb, the three of you will die, too. Are you prepared for that?”

Nanette’s smile melted. “Oh. Hmm…”

“I’ve got it!” The ranger wagged his finger at me enthusiastically. “Why don’t *you* connect the wire after the three of us leave?”

“Don’t be silly,” said the trooper. “He won’t kill himself and the girl just because we ask him to.” He gave me a cautiously hopeful glance. “Will you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nanette chided. “The emperor told *us* to kill Apollo and the girl. Not to have them do it themselves.”

The others mumbled agreement. Following orders to the letter was everything, of course.

"I have an idea!" I said, when in fact I did not.

I had been hoping to come up with some clever plan to overpower the blemmyae and get Meg out of there. So far, no clever plan had materialized. There was also the matter of my promise to Trophonius. I had sworn to destroy his Oracle. I preferred to do that without destroying myself.

The blemmyae waited politely for me to continue. I tried to channel some of Calypso's bravado. (Oh, gods, please never tell her I drew on her for inspiration.)

"It's true you have to kill us yourselves," I began. "And I do understand! But I have a solution that will accomplish all your goals: a mighty explosion, destroying the Oracle, killing us, and getting out alive."

Nanette nodded. "That last one is a bonus, for sure."

"There's an underwater tunnel just here…." I explained how Meg and I had swum through from Trophonius's chamber. "To effectively destroy the Oracle room, you can't set the bomb off here. Someone would have to swim with the device deep inside the tunnel, activate the timer, and swim back out. Now, I am not strong enough, but a blemmyae could do this easily."

The trooper frowned. "But five seconds…is that enough time?"

"Ah," I said, "but it's a well-known fact that underwater, timers take twice as long, so you'd actually have ten seconds."

Nanette blinked. "Are you sure about that?"

The ranger elbowed her. "He just *said* it was a well-known fact. Don't be impolite!"

The trooper scratched his mustache with the barrel of his gun, which was probably against department safety protocols. "I'm still not sure why we have to destroy the Oracle. Why can't we just kill you two, say…with this gun…and leave the Oracle alone?"

I sighed. "If only we could! But, my friend, it's not safe. This girl and I got in and got out with our prophecy, didn't we? That means other trespassers can, too. Surely that's what the emperor meant about the mighty explosion. You don't want to have to come back here with your bomb every time someone breaks in, do you?"

The trooper looked horrified. "Goodness, no!"

"And leaving the Oracle intact, in this place where mortals obviously have guided tours…well, that's a safety hazard! Not closing off the Oracle's cave would be *very* discourteous of us."

"Mmmm." All three blemmyae nodded/bowed earnestly.

“But,” Nanette said, “if you’re trying to trick us somehow…and I apologize for raising that possibility…”

“No, no,” I said. “I fully understand. How about this: Go set the bomb. If you come back safely and the cave blows up on schedule, then you can do us the courtesy of killing us quickly and painlessly. If something goes wrong—”

“Then we can rip your limbs off!” the trooper suggested.

“And trample your bodies into jelly!” added the ranger. “That’s a marvelous idea. Thank you!”

I tried to keep my queasiness under control. “You’re most welcome.”

Nanette studied the bomb, perhaps sensing that something was still off about my plan. Thank the gods, she either didn’t see it or was too polite to mention her reservations.

“Well,” she said at last, “in that case, I’ll be back!”

She scooped up the tanks and leaped into the water, which gave me a few luxurious seconds to come up with a plan to avoid getting trampled into jelly. At last, things were looking up!

37

Your favorite fruit?
I hope you didn't say grapes
Or apples, or figs

POOR NANETTE.

I wonder what went through her mind when she realized that a five-second timer underwater still lasted exactly five seconds. As the device exploded, I imagine she bubbled out one last vile curse like, *Oh, gosh darn it.*

I might have felt sorry for her had she not been planning to kill me.

The cave shook. Chunks of wet stalactite dropped into the lake and whanged against the hulls of the barges. A burst of air erupted from the middle of the lake, upheaving the dock and filling the cavern with the scent of tangerine lipstick.

The trooper and the ranger frowned at me. "You blew up Nanette. That was not polite."

"Hold on!" I yelped. "She's probably still swimming back. It's a long tunnel."

This bought me another three or four seconds, during which a clever escape plan still did not present itself. At the very least, I hoped Nanette's death had not been in vain. I hoped the explosion had destroyed the Cave of the Oracle as Trophonius wished, but I could not be certain.

Meg was still only half-conscious, muttering and shivering. I had to get her back to the Waystation and set her on the Throne of Memory quickly, but two blemmyae still stood in my way. My hands were too numb to be any good with a bow or a ukulele. I wished I had some other weapon—even a magical Brazilian handkerchief that I could wave in my enemies' faces! Oh, if only a surge of divine strength would course through my body!

At last the ranger sighed. "All right, Apollo. Would you prefer we stomp or dismember you first? It's only right you get to choose."

"That's very polite," I agreed. Then I gasped. "Oh, my gods! Look over

there!”

You must forgive me. I realize that this method of distraction is the oldest trick in the book. In fact, it is a trick so old it predates papyrus scrolls and was first recorded on clay tablets in Mesopotamia. But the blemmyae fell for it.

They were slow at “looking over there.” They could not glance. They could not turn their heads without turning their entire bodies, so they executed a full one-hundred-and-eighty-degree waddle.

I had no follow-up trick in mind. I simply knew I had to save Meg and get out of there. Then an aftershock rattled the cavern, unbalancing the blemmyae, and I took advantage. I kicked the ranger into the lake. At precisely the same moment, a portion of the ceiling peeled loose and fell on top of said ranger like a hailstorm of major appliances. The ranger disappeared under churning foam.

I could only stare in amazement. I was fairly sure *I* hadn’t caused the ceiling to crack and collapse. Blind luck? Or perhaps the spirit of Trophonius had granted me one last grudging favor for destroying his cave. Crushing someone under a rain of rocks did seem like the sort of favor he would grant.

The trooper missed the whole thing. He turned back to me, a puzzled look on his chest-face. “I don’t see any…Wait. Where did my friend go?”

“Hmm?” I asked. “What friend?”

His impressive mustache twitched. “Eduardo. The ranger.”

I feigned confusion. “A ranger? Here?”

“Yes, he was just here.”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

The cavern shuddered once again. Sadly, no more obliging chunks of ceiling broke free to crush my last enemy.

“Well,” the trooper said, “maybe he had to leave. You’ll excuse me if I have to kill you by myself now. Orders.”

“Oh, yes, but first…”

The trooper was not to be deterred any longer. He grabbed my arm, crushing my ulna and radius together. I screamed. My knees buckled.

“Let the girl go,” I whimpered through the pain. “Kill me and let her go.”

I surprised myself. These were not the last words I had planned. In the event of my death, I’d been hoping to have time to compose a ballad of my glorious deeds—a very *long* ballad. Yet here I was, at the end of my life, pleading not for myself, but for Meg McCaffrey.

I’d love to take credit for what happened next. I’d like to think my noble gesture of self-sacrifice proved my worthiness and summoned our saviors from the ethereal plane. More likely, though, they were already in the area, searching for Meg, and heard my scream of agony.

With a bloodcurdling battle cry, three karpoi hurtled down the tunnel and flew at the trooper, landing on his face.

The trooper staggered across the dock, the three peach spirits howling, clawing, and biting like a school of winged, fruit-flavored piranhas…which, in retrospect, I suppose does not make them sound very piranha-like.

"Please get off!" the trooper wailed. "Please and thank you!"

The karpoi were not concerned with good manners. After twenty more seconds of savage peachery, the trooper was reduced to a pile of monster ash, tattered fabric, and mustache whiskers.

The middle karpos spit out something that might have once been the officer's handgun. He flapped his leafy wings. I deduced that he was our usual friend, the one known as Peaches, because his eyes gleamed a little more viciously, and his diaper sagged a little more dangerously.

I cradled my broken arm. "Thank you, Peaches! I don't know how I can ever __"

He ignored me and flew to Meg's side. He wailed and stroked her hair.

The other two karpoi studied me with a hungry gleam in their eyes.

"Peaches?" I whimpered. "Could you tell them I'm a friend? Please?"

Peaches howled inconsolably. He scraped dirt and rubble around Meg's legs, the way one might plant a sapling.

"Peaches!" I called again. "I can help her, but I need to get her back to the Waystation. The Throne of Memory—" Nausea made the world tilt and twist. My vision went green.

Once I could focus again, I found Peaches and the other two karpoi standing in a line, all staring at me.

"Peaches?" demanded Peaches.

"Yes," I groaned. "We need to get her to Indianapolis quickly. If you and your friends…Um, I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Apollo."

Peaches pointed to his friend on the right. "Peaches." Then to the baby demon on his left. "Peaches."

"I see." I tried to think. Agony spiked up my arm into my jaw. "Now, listen, I —I have a car. A red Mercedes, nearby. If I can get to it, I can drive Meg to—to…"

I looked down at my broken forearm. It was turning some beautiful shades of purple and orange, like an Aegean sunset. I realized I wasn't going to be driving anywhere.

My mind began sinking into a sea of pain under that lovely sunset.

"Be with you in a minute," I muttered.

Then I passed out.

38

Waystation damaged
Commodus will pay for this
And I don't take cash

I REMEMBER VERY LITTLE about the trip back.

Somehow, Peaches and his two friends carried Meg and me out of the cave and to the Mercedes. More disturbingly, the three karpoi somehow drove us to Indianapolis while Meg sat muttering and shivering in the passenger seat and I lay groaning in the back.

Don't ask me how three karpoi combined forces to drive an automobile. I can't tell you which of them used the wheel, the brake, or the gas pedal. It's not the sort of behavior you expect from edible fruit.

All I know is that by the time I regained more or less full consciousness, we had reached the city limits.

My broken forearm was wrapped in leaves glued together with sap. I had no memory of how this came to pass, but the arm felt better—still sore, but not excruciating. I counted myself lucky the peach spirits had not tried to plant me and water me.

I managed to sit upright just as the peach spirits curbed the Mercedes on Capital Avenue. Ahead of us, police cars blocked the road. Large red signs on sawhorses announced: GAS LEAK EMERGENCY. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE!

A gas leak. Leo Valdez had been right again. Assuming he was still alive, he'd be insufferable about this for weeks.

A few blocks beyond the barricades, a column of black smoke rose from the approximate location of the Waystation. My heart fractured more painfully than my arm. I glanced at the Mercedes's dashboard clock. We had been gone less than four hours. It felt like a lifetime—a *godly* lifetime.

I scanned the sky. I saw no reassuring bronze dragon flying overhead, no helpful griffins defending their nest. If the Waystation had fallen…No, I had to

think positive. I wouldn't let my fears attract any more prophetic bee swarms today.

"Peaches," I said. "I need you—"

I turned my gaze forward and nearly jumped through the car ceiling.

Peaches and his two friends were staring at me, their chins in a line atop the driver's seat back like See-No-Evil, Peel-No-Evil, and Eat-No-Evil.

"Ah…yes. Hi," I said. "Please, I need you to stay with Meg. Protect her at all costs."

Peaches Prime bared his razor-sharp teeth and snarled, "Peaches."

I took this as agreement.

"I have to check on our friends at the Waystation," I said. "If I don't come back…" The words stuck in my throat. "…then you'll have to search for the Throne of Memory. Getting Meg into that chair is the only way to heal her mind."

I stared at the three pairs of glowing green eyes. I couldn't tell if the karpoi understood what I was saying, and I didn't know how they could possibly follow my instructions. If the battle was over and the Throne of Memory had been taken or destroyed…No. That was bee-pollen thinking!

"Just…take care of her," I pleaded.

I stepped out of the car and valiantly threw up on the sidewalk. Pink emojis danced across my eyes. I hobbled down the street, my arm covered in sap and leaves, my damp clothes smelling of bat guano and snake excrement. It was not my most glorious charge into battle.

No one stopped me at the barricades. The officers on duty (regular mortals, I guessed) looked more interested in their smartphone screens than in the smoke rising behind them. Perhaps the Mist concealed the true situation. Perhaps they figured if a ragged street person wanted to stumble toward a gas-leak emergency, they weren't going to stop him. Or perhaps they were engrossed in an epic *Pokémon Go* gym battle.

A block inside the cordoned zone, I saw the first burning bulldozer. I suspected it had driven over a land mine specially modified by Leo Valdez, since along with being half-demolished and in flames it was also splattered with smiley-face stickers and gobs of whipped cream.

I hobbled faster. I spotted more disabled bulldozers, scattered rubble, totaled cars, and piles of monster dust, but no bodies. That raised my spirits a little. Just around the corner from the Union Station roundabout, I heard clanging swords ahead—then a gunshot and something that sounded like thunder.

I had never been so happy to hear a battle in progress. It meant not everyone was dead.

I ran. My weary legs screamed in protest. Every time my shoes hit the pavement, a jarring pain shot up my forearm.

I turned the corner and found myself in combat. Charging toward me with murder in his eyes was a demigod warrior—some teenage boy I'd never seen, wearing Roman-style armor over his street clothes. Fortunately, he'd already been badly beaten up. His eyes were almost swollen shut. His bronze chest plate was dented like a metal roof after a hailstorm. He could barely hold his sword. I wasn't in much better shape, but I was running on anger and desperation. I managed to unsling my ukulele and slam the demigod in the face.

He crumpled at my feet.

I was feeling pretty proud of my heroic act until I looked up. In the middle of the roundabout, on top of the fountain and surrounded by Cyclopes, my favorite graduate accounting student, Olujime, stood like an ancient war god, swinging a bronze weapon that resembled a double-wide hockey stick. Each sweep sent crackling tendrils of electricity through his enemies. Every hit disintegrated a Cyclops.

I liked Jimmy even more now. I'd never had much affection for Cyclopes. Still…something was strange about his use of lightning. I could always recognize the power of Zeus in action. I'd been zapped by his bolts often enough. Jimmy's electricity was different—a more humid scent of ozone, a darker red hue to the flashes. I wished I could ask him about that, but he looked a little busy.

Smaller fights raged here and there across the roundabout. The Waystation's defenders appeared to have the upper hand. Hunter Kowalski leaped from foe to foe, shooting down blemmyae, wolf-headed warriors, and wild centaurs with ease. She had an uncanny ability to fire on the move, avoid counterstrikes, and target her victims' kneecaps. As an archer, I was impressed. If I'd still had my godly powers, I would have blessed her with fabulous prizes like a magic quiver and possibly a signed copy of my greatest-hits anthology on classic vinyl.

In the hotel drive-through, Sssssarah the dracaena sat propped against a mailbox, her snake-tail legs curled around her, her neck swollen to the size of a basketball. I ran to her aid, afraid she might be wounded. Then I realized the lump in her throat was in the shape of a Gallic war helmet. Her chest and belly were also quite bloated.

She smiled at me lazily. "'Sssssup?"

"Sssssarah," I said, "did you swallow a Germanus whole?"

"No." She belched. The smell was definitely barbarian, with a hint of clove. "Well, perhapsssss."

"Where are the others?" I ducked as a silver arrow flew over my head,

shattering the windshield of a nearby Subaru. “Where’s Commodus?”

Sssssarah pointed toward the Waystation. “In there, I think. He killed a path into the building.”

She didn’t sound too concerned about this, probably because she was sated and sleepy. The pillar of dark smoke I’d noticed earlier was pouring from a hole in the roof of the Waystation. Even more distressing, lying across the green shingles like an insect part stuck on flypaper was the detached bronze wing of a dragon.

Rage boiled inside me. Whether the sun chariot or Festus or a school bus, *no one* messes with my ride.

The main doors of the Union Station building had been blown wide open. I charged inside past piles of monster dust and bricks, burning pieces of furniture, and a centaur hanging upside down, kicking and whinnying in a net trap.

In one stairwell, a wounded Hunter of Artemis groaned in pain as a comrade bound her bleeding leg. A few feet farther on, a demigod I didn’t recognize lay unmoving on the floor. I knelt next to him—a boy of about sixteen, *my* mortal age. I felt no pulse. I didn’t know whose side he had fought on, but that didn’t matter. Either way, his death was a terrible waste. I had begun to think that perhaps demigod lives were not as disposable as we gods liked to believe.

I ran through more corridors, trusting the Waystation to send me in the right direction. I burst into the library where I’d sat last night. The scene within hit me like the explosion from one of Britomartis’s bouncing mines.

Lying across the table was the body of a griffin. With a sob of horror, I rushed to her side. Heloise’s left wing was folded across her body like a shroud. Her head lay bent at an unnatural angle. The floor around her was piled with broken weapons, dented armor, and monster dust. She had died fighting off a host of enemies…but she had died.

My eyes burned. I cradled her head, breathing in the clean smell of hay and molting feathers. “Oh, Heloise. You saved me. Why couldn’t I save you?”

Where was her mate, Abelard? Was their egg safe? I wasn’t sure which thought was more terrible: the whole family of griffins dead, or the father and the griffin chick forced to live with the devastating loss of Heloise.

I kissed her beak. Proper grieving would have to wait. Other friends might still be in need of help.

With newfound energy, I bounded up a staircase two steps at a time.

I stormed through a set of doors into the main hall.

The scene was eerily calm. Smoke flooded out the gaping hole of the roof, billowing from the loft where a smoldering bulldozer chassis was, inexplicably, lodged nose-down. Heloise and Abelard’s nest appeared to be intact, but there

were no signs of the male griffin or the egg. In Josephine's workshop area, sprawled across the floor, lay the severed head and neck of Festus, his ruby eyes dark and lifeless. The rest of his body was nowhere to be seen.

Sofas had been smashed and overturned. Kitchen appliances were riddled with bullet holes. The scope of damage was heartbreaking.

But the most serious problem was the standoff around the dining table.

On the side nearest me stood Josephine, Calypso, Lityerses, and Thalia Grace. Thalia had her bow drawn. Lit brandished his sword. Calypso raised her bare hands, martial arts–style, and Josephine hefted her submachine gun, Little Bertha.

On the far side of the table stood Commodus himself, smiling brilliantly despite a bleeding diagonal cut across his face. Imperial gold armor gleamed over his purple tunic. He held his blade, a gold *spatha*, casually at his side.

To either side of him stood a Germanus bodyguard. The barbarian on the right had his arm clamped around Emmie's neck, his other hand pressing a pistol crossbow against Emmie's head. Georgina stood with her mother, Emmie hugging the little girl tightly to her chest. Alas, the little girl seemed to have fully recovered her wits only to be faced with this fresh horror.

To Commodus's left, a second Germanus held Leo Valdez in a similar hostage stance.

I clenched my fists. "Villainy! Commodus, let them go!"

"Hello, Lester!" Commodus beamed. "You're just in time for the fun!"

39

During this standoff
No flash photography, please
Oops. My bad. Ha-ha

THALIA'S FINGERS clenched her bowstring. A bead of sweat, silvery as moonwater, traced the side of her ear. "Say the word," she told me, "and I will bore a hole between this moron emperor's eyes."

A tempting offer, but I knew it was bravado. Thalia was just as terrified as I was of losing Leo and Emmie…and especially poor Georgie, who'd been through so much. I doubted any of our weapons could kill an immortal like Commodus, much less him and two guards. No matter how quickly we attacked, we would not be able to save our friends.

Josephine shifted her grip on the submachine gun. Her coveralls were splattered with goo, dust, and blood. Her short silver hair glistened with perspiration.

"It's gonna be okay, baby," she muttered. "Stay calm." I wasn't sure if she was talking to Emmie or Georgie or herself.

Next to her, Calypso's hands were frozen in midair as if she were standing in front of her loom, considering what to weave. Her eyes were fixed on Leo. She shook her head ever so slightly, perhaps telling him, *Don't be an idiot.* (She told him that a lot.)

Lityerses stood next to me. His leg wound had started to bleed again, soaking through the bandages. His hair and clothes were scorched as if he'd run through a gauntlet of flamethrowers, leaving his Cornhuskers shirt looking like the surface of a burnt marshmallow. Only the word CORN was still visible.

Judging from the bloody edge of his sword, I guessed he was responsible for the ghastly new slash across Commodus's face.

"No good way to do this," Lit muttered to me. "Somebody's gonna die."

"No," I said. "Thalia, lower your bow."

“Excuse me?”

“Josephine, the gun, too. Please.”

Commodus chuckled. “Yes, you all should listen to Lester! And Calypso, dear, if you try to summon one of those wind spirits again, I *will* kill your little friend here.”

I glanced at the sorceress. “You summoned a spirit?”

She nodded, distracted, shaken. “A small one.”

“But the larger issue,” Leo called out, “is that I am *not* little. We are *not* going to make *say hello to my little friend* a thing.” He raised his palms, despite his captor tightening his hold around the demigod’s neck. “Besides, guys, it’s okay. I’ve got everything under control.”

“Leo,” I said evenly, “a seven-foot-tall barbarian is holding a crossbow against the side of your head.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “It’s all part of the plan!”

On the word *plan*, he winked at me in an exaggerated way. Either Leo really *did* have a plan (unlikely, since in the weeks I’d known him he mostly relied on bluffs, jokes, and improvisation) or he was expecting *me* to have a plan. That was depressingly likely. As I may have mentioned, people often made that mistake. Just because I’m a god does not mean you should look to me for answers!

Commodus lifted two fingers. “Albatrix, if the demigod speaks again, you have my permission to shoot him.”

The barbarian grunted assent. Leo clamped his mouth shut. I could see in his eyes that even under pain of death, he was having trouble holding back a witty retort.

“Now!” Commodus said. “As we were discussing before Lester got here, I require the Throne of Mnemosyne. Where is it?”

Thank the gods….The throne was still hidden, which meant Meg could still use it to heal her mind. This knowledge steeled my resolve.

“Are you telling me,” I asked, “that your great army surrounded this place, invaded, and couldn’t even find a chair? Is this all you have left—a couple of witless Germani and some hostages? What sort of emperor are you? Now, your father, Marcus Aurelius, *there* was an emperor.”

His expression soured. His eyes darkened. I recalled a time in Commodus’s campaign tent when a servant carelessly spilled wine on my friend’s robes. Commodus had that same dark look in his eyes as he beat the boy almost to death with a lead goblet. Back then, as a god, I found the incident only mildly distasteful. Now I knew something about being on the receiving end of Commodus’s cruelty.

“I’m not finished, *Lester*,” he snarled. “I’ll admit this cursed building was more trouble than I expected. I blame my former prefect Alaric. He was *woefully* unprepared. I had to kill him.”

“Shocking,” muttered Lityerses.

“But most of my forces are merely lost,” Commodus said. “They’ll be back.”

“Lost?” I looked at Josephine. “Where did they go?”

Her eyes stayed focused on Emmie and Georgie, but she seemed to take pride in answering. “From what the Waystation is telling me,” she said, “about half of his monstrous troops fell into a giant chute marked LAUNDRY. The rest ended up in the furnace room. Nobody ever comes back from the furnace room.”

“No matter!” Commodus snapped.

“And his mercenaries,” Josephine continued, “wound up at the Indiana Convention Center. Right now, they’re trying to navigate their way through the trade-show floor of the Home and Garden Expo.”

“Soldiers are expendable!” Commodus shrieked. Blood dripped down his new facial wound, speckling his armor and robes. “Your friends here cannot be so easily replaced. Neither can the Throne of Memory. So let’s make a deal! I will take the throne. I will kill the girl and Lester, and raze this building to the ground. That’s what the prophecy said for me to do, and I never argue with Oracles! In exchange, the rest of you can go free. I don’t need you.”

“Jo.” Emmie said her name like an order.

Perhaps she meant: *You cannot let him win.* Or: *You cannot let Georgina die.* Whatever it was, in Emmie’s face I saw that same disregard for her own mortal life that she’d had as a young princess, flinging herself off the cliff. She didn’t mind death, as long as it was on her terms. The determined light in her eyes had not dimmed in three thousand years.

Light…

A shiver rolled down my back. I remembered something Marcus Aurelius used to tell his son, a quote that later became famous in his *Meditations* book: *Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now, take what’s left and live it properly. What doesn’t transmit light creates its own darkness.*

Commodus *hated* that piece of advice. He found it suffocating, self-righteous, impossible. What was *proper*? Commodus intended to live forever. He would drive away the darkness with the roar of crowds and the glitter of spectacle.

But he generated no light.

Not like the Waystation. Marcus Aurelius would have approved of this place. Emmie and Josephine lived properly with what time they had left, creating light for everyone who came here. No wonder Commodus hated them. No wonder he

was so bent on destroying this threat to his power.

And Apollo, above all, was the god of light.

"Commodus." I drew myself up to my full, not-very-impressive height. "This is the only deal. You will let your hostages go. You will leave here empty-handed and never return."

The emperor laughed. "That would sound more intimidating coming from a god, not a zitty adolescent."

His Germani were well-trained to stay impassive, but they betrayed scornful smirks. They didn't fear me. Right now, that was fine.

"I am still Apollo." I spread my arms. "Last chance to leave of your own accord."

I detected a flicker of doubt in the emperor's eyes. "What will you do—kill me? Unlike you, *Lester*, I am immortal. I cannot die."

"I don't need to kill you." I stepped forward to the edge of the dining table. "Look at me closely. Don't you recognize my divine nature, old friend?"

Commodus hissed. "I recognize the betrayer who strangled me in my bath. I recognize the so-called *god* who promised me blessings and then deserted me!" His voice frayed with pain, which he tried to conceal behind an arrogant sneer. "All I see is a flabby teenager with a bad complexion. You also need a haircut."

"My friends," I told the others, "I want you to avert your eyes. I am about to reveal my true godly form."

Not being fools, Leo and Emmie shut their eyes tight. Emmie covered Georgina's face with her hand. I hoped my friends on my side of the dining table would also listen. I had to believe that they trusted me, despite my failings, despite the way I looked.

Commodus scoffed. "You're damp and speckled with bat poop, Lester. You're a pathetic child who has been dragged through the darkness. That darkness is still in your mind. I see the fear in your eyes. This *is* your true form, Apollo! You're a fraud!"

Apollo. He had called me by my name.

I saw the terror he was trying to hide, and also his sense of awe. I remembered what Trophonius told me: Commodus would send servants into the caverns for answers, but he would never go himself. As much as he needed the Dark Oracle, he feared what it might show him, which of his deepest fears that bee swarm might feed on.

I had survived a journey he would never dare take.

"Behold," I said.

Commodus and his men could have looked away. They didn't. In their pride and contempt, they accepted my challenge.

My body superheated, every particle igniting in a chain reaction. Like the world's most powerful flashbulb, I blasted the room with radiance. I became pure light.

It lasted only a microsecond. Then the screaming began. The Germani reeled backward, their crossbows firing wildly. One bolt zipped past Leo's head and embedded itself in a sofa. The other bolt shattered against the floor, splinters skittering across the tiles.

Melodramatic to the end, Commodus pressed his palms against his eye sockets and screamed, "MY EYES!"

My strength faded. I grabbed the table to keep from falling.

"It's safe," I told my friends.

Leo broke from his captor. He lunged toward Emmie and Georgina, and the three of them scrambled away as Commodus and his men, now quite blind, stumbled and howled, steam pouring from their eye sockets.

Where the captors and hostages had stood, silhouettes were burned across the tile floor. The details on the brick walls now seemed in super–high definition. The nearest sofa covers, once dark red, were now pink. Commodus's purple robes had been bleached a weak shade of mauve.

I turned to my friends. Their clothes had also lightened by several shades. The fronts of their hair had been frosted with highlights, but they had all, wisely, kept their eyes shut.

Thalia studied me in amazement. "What just happened? Why are you toasted?"

I looked down. True enough, my skin was now the color of maple bark. My leaf-and-sap cast had burned away, leaving my arm fully healed. I thought I looked quite nice this way, though I hoped I could become a god again before I discovered what sort of horrible skin cancers I'd just given myself. Belatedly, I realized how much danger I'd been in. I had actually managed to reveal my true divine form. I had become pure light. Stupid Apollo! Amazing, wonderful, stupid Apollo! This mortal body was not meant for channeling such power. I was fortunate I hadn't burned up instantly like an antique flashbulb.

Commodus wailed. He grabbed the nearest thing he could find, which happened to be one of his Germani, and lifted the blind barbarian over his head. "I will destroy you all!"

He threw his barbarian toward the sound of Thalia's voice. Since we could all see, we scattered easily and avoided becoming bowling pins. The Germanus hit the opposite wall with such force, he broke into a starburst of yellow powder and left a beautiful abstract expressionist statement across the bricks.

"I do not need eyes to kill you!" Commodus slashed upward with his sword,

taking a chunk out of the dining table.

"Commodus," I warned, "you will leave this city and never return, or I will take more than your sight."

He charged toward me. I sidestepped. Thalia let loose an arrow, but Commodus was moving too fast. The missile hit the second Germanus, who grunted in surprise, fell to his knees, and crumbled to powder.

Commodus tripped over a chair. He face-planted on the living room rug. Let me be clear: it's *never* okay to take delight in the struggles of someone who can't see, but in this rare instance, I couldn't help myself. If anyone deserved to fall on his face, it was Emperor Commodus.

"You will leave," I told him again. "You will not return. Your reign in Indianapolis is over."

"It's Commodianapolis!" He struggled to his feet. His armor sported some new skid marks. The slash across his face was not getting any prettier. A little figurine made of pipe cleaners—maybe something Georgina had made—clung to the emperor's shaggy beard like a mountain climber.

"You haven't won anything, Apollo," he growled. "You have no idea what's being prepared for your friends in the east and the west! They will die. All of them!"

Leo Valdez sighed. "All right, guys. This has been fun, but I'm gonna melt his face now, 'kay?"

"Wait," said Lityerses.

The swordsman advanced on his former master. "Commodus, go while you still can."

"I *made* you, boy," said the emperor. "I saved you from obscurity. I was a second father to you. I gave you purpose!"

"A second father even worse than the first," Lit said. "And I've found a new purpose."

Commodus charged, swinging his sword wildly.

Lit parried. He stepped toward Josephine's workshop. "Over here, New Hercules."

Commodus took the bait, rushing toward Lit's voice.

Lit ducked. He blade-slapped the emperor's butt. "Wrong way, sire."

The emperor stumbled into Josephine's welding station, then backed into a circular saw, which, fortunately for him, was not running at the time.

Lityerses positioned himself at the base of the giant rose window. I realized his plan as he yelled, "Over here, Commode!"

The emperor howled and charged. Lit stepped out of the way. Commodus barreled straight toward the window. He might have been able to stop himself,

but at the last second, Calypso flicked her hands. A gust of wind carried Commodus forward. The New Hercules, the god-emperor of Rome, shattered the glass at the six o’clock mark and tumbled into the void.

40

Shakespeare, don't bring that
Iambic pentameter
Up in my face, yo

WE GATHERED at the window and peered down. The emperor was nowhere to be seen. Some of our friends stood in the roundabout below, gazing up at us with confused expressions.

"A little warning, perhaps?" Jimmy called.

He had run out of enemies to electrocute. He and Hunter Kowalski now stood unscathed in the middle of a mosaic of fallen glass shards.

"Where's Commodus?" I asked.

Hunter shrugged. "We didn't see him."

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "He literally just flew out this window."

"No," Leo corrected. "He *Lityerses-ly* flew out the window. Am I right? Those were some sweet moves, man."

Lit nodded. "Thanks."

The two bumped fists as if they hadn't spent the last few days talking about how much they wanted to kill each other. They would have made fine Olympian gods.

"Well," Thalia said. Her new gray highlights from my solar blast looked quite fetching. "I guess we should do a sweep of the neighborhood. If Commodus is still out there…" She gazed down South Illinois Street. "Wait, is that *Meg*?"

Rounding the corner were three karpoi, holding Meg McCaffrey aloft as if she were bodysurfing (or peach-surfing). I almost jumped out the window to get to her. Then I remembered I could not fly.

"The Throne of Memory," I told Emmie. "We need it now!"

We met the karpoi in the building's front foyer. One of the Peacheses had retrieved the Arrow of Dodona from under the Mercedes's driver's seat and now

carried it in his teeth like a pirate's accessory. He offered it to me. I wasn't sure whether to thank him or curse him, but I slipped the arrow back into my quiver for safekeeping.

Josephine and Leo rushed in from a side room, carrying between them my old backpack—the Throne of Memory. They placed it in the center of a still-smoldering Persian rug.

The peach babies carefully lowered Meg into the seat.

"Calypso," I said. "Notepad?"

"Got it!" She brandished her small legal tablet and pencil. I decided she would make an excellent high school student after all. She actually came to class prepared!

I knelt next to Meg. Her skin was too blue, her breath too ragged. I placed my hands on the sides of her face and checked her eyes. Her pupils were pinpoints. Her consciousness seemed to be withdrawing, getting smaller and smaller.

"Stay with me, Meg," I pleaded. "You're among friends now. You're in the Throne of Mnemosyne. Speak your prophecy!"

Meg lurched upright. Her hands gripped the sides of the chair as if a strong electric current had taken hold of her.

We all backed away, forming a rough circle around her as dark smoke spewed from her mouth and encircled her legs.

When she spoke, it was thankfully not in Trophonius's voice—just a deep neutral monotone worthy of Delphi itself:

The words that memory wrought are set to fire,
Ere new moon rises o'er the Devil's Mount.
The changeling lord shall face a challenge dire,
Till bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.

"Oh, no," I muttered. "No, no, no."

"What?" Leo demanded.

I glanced at Calypso, who was scribbling furiously. "We're going to need a bigger notepad."

"What do you mean?" Josephine asked. "Surely the prophecy's done—"

Meg gasped and continued:

Yet southward must the sun now trace its course,
Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death

To find the master of the swift white horse
And wrest from him the crossword speaker's breath.

It had been centuries since I'd heard a prophecy in this form, yet I knew it well. I wished I could stop this recitation and save Meg the agony, but there was nothing I could do.

She shivered and exhaled the third stanza:

To westward palace must the Lester go;
Demeter's daughter finds her ancient roots.
The cloven guide alone the way does know,
To walk the path in thine own enemy's boots.

Then, the culminating horror, she spewed forth a rhyming couplet:

When three are known and Tiber reached alive,
'Tis only then Apollo starts to jive.

The dark smoke dissipated. I rushed forward as Meg slumped into my arms. Her breathing was already more regular, her skin warmer. Thank the Fates. The prophecy had been exorcised.

Leo was the first to speak. "What *was* that? Buy one prophecy, get three free? That was a lot of lines."

"It was a sonnet," I said, still in disbelief. "May the gods help us; it was a Shakespearean sonnet."

I had thought the limerick of Dodona was bad. But a full Shakespearean sonnet, complete with ABAB rhyme scheme, ending couplet, and iambic pentameter? Such a horror could only have come from Trophonius's cave.

I recalled my many arguments with William Shakespeare.

Bill, I said. *No one will accept this poetry! Du-DUH, du-DUH, du-DUH, du-DUH, du-DUH. What sort of beat is that?*

I mean, in real life, no one talks like that!

Hmm…actually the line I just wrote *was* in iambic pentameter. The stuff is infectious. Gah!

Thalia shouldered her bow. "That was all one poem? But it had four different sections."

"Yes," I said. "The sonnet conveys only the most elaborate prophecies, with

multiple moving parts. None of them good, I fear."

Meg began to snore.

"We will parse our doom later," I said. "We should let Meg rest—"

My body chose that moment to give out. I had asked too much of it. Now it rebelled. I crumpled sideways, Meg spilling over on top of me. Our friends rushed forward. I felt myself being gently lifted, wondering hazily if I was peach-surfing or if Zeus had recalled me to the heavens.

Then I saw Josephine's face looming over me like a Mount Rushmore president as she carried me through the corridor.

"Infirmary for this one," she said to someone next to her. "And then…*pee-yoo*. He definitely needs a bath."

A few hours of dreamless sleep, followed by a bubble bath.

It was not Mount Olympus, my friends, but it was close.

By late afternoon, I was freshly dressed in clothes that weren't freezing and did not smell of cave excrement. My belly was full of honey and just-baked bread. I roamed the Waystation, helping out where I could. It was good to stay busy. It kept me from thinking too much about the lines of the Dark Prophecy.

Meg rested comfortably in a guest room, guarded vigilantly by Peaches, Peaches, and Other Peaches.

The Hunters of Artemis tended the wounded, who were so numerous the Waystation had to double the size of its infirmary. Outside, Livia the elephant helped with cleanup, moving broken vehicles and wreckage from the roundabout. Leo and Josie spent the afternoon collecting pieces of Festus the dragon, who had been torn apart bare-handed, they told me, by Commodus himself. Fortunately, Leo seemed to find this more of an annoyance than a tragedy.

"Nah, man," he said when I offered my condolences. "I can put him back together easy enough. I redesigned him so he's like a Lego kit, built for quick assembly!"

He went back to helping Josephine, who was using a crane to extract Festus's left hind leg from the Union Station bell tower.

Calypso, in a burst of aerial magic, summoned enough wind spirits to reassemble the glass shards of the rose window, then promptly collapsed from the effort.

Sssssarah, Jimmy, and Thalia Grace swept the surrounding streets, looking for any sign of Commodus, but the emperor had simply disappeared. I thought of how I'd saved Hemithea and Parthenos when they jumped off that cliff long ago,

dissolving them into light. Could a quasi-deity such as Commodus do something like that to himself? Whatever the case, I had a suspicion that we hadn't seen the last of good old New Hercules.

At sunset I was asked to join a small family memorial for Heloise the griffin. The entire population of the Waystation would have come to honor her sacrifice, but Emmie explained that a large crowd would upset Abelard even worse than he already was. While Hunter Kowalski sat on egg duty in the henhouse (where Heloise's egg had been moved for safekeeping before the battle) I joined Emmie, Josephine, Georgie, and Calypso on the roof. Abelard, the grieving widower, watched in silence as Calypso and I—honorary relatives since our rescue mission to the zoo—laid the body of Heloise gently across a fallow bed of soil in the garden.

After death, griffins become surprisingly light. Their bodies desiccate when their spirits pass on, leaving only fur, feathers, and hollow bones. We stepped back as Abelard prowled toward the body of his mate. He ruffled his wings, then gently buried his beak in Heloise's neck plumage one last time. He threw back his head and let out a piercing cry—a call that said, *I am here. Where are you?*

Then he launched himself into the sky and disappeared in the low gray clouds. Heloise's body crumbled to dust.

"We'll plant catnip in this bed." Emmie wiped a tear from her cheek. "Heloise loved catnip."

Calypso dried her eyes on her sleeve. "That sounds lovely. Where did Abelard go?"

Josephine scanned the clouds. "He'll be back. He needs time. It'll be several more weeks before the egg hatches. We'll keep watch over it for him."

The idea of father and egg, alone in the world, made me unspeakably sad, yet I knew they had the most loving extended family they could hope for here at the Waystation.

During the brief ceremony, Georgina had been eyeing me warily, fiddling with something in her hands. A doll? I hadn't really been paying attention. Now Josephine patted her daughter's back.

"It's all right, baby," Josephine assured her. "Go ahead."

Georgina shuffled toward me. She was wearing a clean set of coveralls, which looked much better on her than they did on Leo. Newly washed, her brown hair was fluffier, her face pinker.

"My moms told me you might be my dad," she murmured, not meeting my eyes.

I gulped. Over the ages, I'd been through scenarios like this countless times, but as Lester Papadopoulos, I felt even more awkward than usual. "I—I might

be, Georgina. I don't know."

"'Kay." She held up the thing she was holding—a figure made of pipe cleaners—and pressed it into my hands. "Made this for you. You can take it with you when you go away."

I examined the doll. It wasn't much, a sort of gingerbread-man silhouette of wire and rainbow fuzz, with a few beard whiskers stuck in the joints….Wait. Oh, dear. This was the same little doll that had been smashed against Commodus's face. I supposed it must have fallen out when he charged toward the window.

"Thank you," I said. "Georgina, if you ever need me, if you ever want to talk __"

"No, I'm good." She turned and ran back to Josephine's arms.

Josephine kissed the top of her head. "You did fine, baby."

They turned and headed for the stairs. Calypso smirked at me, then followed, leaving me alone with Emmie.

For a few moments, we stood together in silence at the garden bed.

Emmie pulled her old silver Hunter's coat around her. "Heloise and Abelard were our first friends here, when we took over the Waystation."

"I'm so sorry."

Her gray hair glinted like steel in the sunset. Her wrinkles looked deeper, her face more worn and weary. How much longer would she live in this mortal life…another twenty years? The blink of an eye to an immortal. Yet I could no longer feel annoyed with her for giving up my gift of divinity. Artemis obviously had understood her choice. Artemis, who shunned all sorts of romantic love, saw that Emmie and Josephine deserved to grow old together. I had to accept that, too.

"You've built something good here, Hemithea," I said. "Commodus could not destroy it. You'll restore what you've lost. I envy you."

She managed a faint smile. "I never thought I'd hear those words from you, Lord Apollo."

Lord Apollo. The title did not fit me. It felt like a hat I'd worn centuries ago…something large and impractical and top-heavy like those Elizabethan chapeaus Bill Shakespeare used to hide his bald pate.

"What of the Dark Prophecy?" Emmie asked. "Do you know what it means?"

I watched a stray griffin feather tumble across the dirt. "Some. Not all. Perhaps enough to make a plan."

Emmie nodded. "Then we'd best gather our friends. We can talk at dinner. Besides"—she punched my arm gently—"those carrots aren't going to peel themselves."

41

Prophecies don't mix
With Tofurky and biscuits
Just give me dessert

MAY THE FATES consign all root vegetables to the depths of Tartarus.

That is all I will say on the matter.

By dinnertime, the main hall had been mostly put back together.

Even Festus, amazingly, had been more or less reconstructed. He was now parked on the roof, enjoying a large tub of motor oil and Tabasco sauce. Leo looked pleased with his efforts, though he was still searching for a few last missing parts. He'd spent the afternoon walking around the Waystation, shouting, "If anyone sees a bronze spleen about yea big, please let me know!"

The Hunters sat in groups around the hall, as was their habit, but they had integrated the newcomers we'd freed from Commodus's cells. Fighting side by side had created bonds of friendship.

Emmie presided at the head of the dining table. Georgina lay asleep in her lap, a stack of coloring books and markers in front of her. Thalia Grace sat at the other end, twirling her dagger on its point like a top. Josephine and Calypso were shoulder to shoulder, studying Calypso's notes and discussing various interpretations of the prophetic lines.

I sat next to Meg. What else is new? She seemed fully recovered, thanks to Emmie's healing. (At my suggestion, Emmie had removed her enclosure of curative snakes from the infirmary while treating Meg. I feared if McCaffrey woke up and saw serpents, she might panic and turn them into chia pets.) Her three peach-spirit attendants had gone off, for now, to the extra-dimensional plane of fruit.

My young friend's appetite was even more voracious than usual. She shoveled in her Tofurky and dressing, her movements as furtive as if she'd gone back to being a half-feral alley child. I kept my hands well away from her.

At last, Josephine and Calypso looked up from the yellow legal pad.

"Okay." Calypso let out a deep sigh. "We've interpreted some of these lines, but we need your help, Apollo. Maybe you could start by telling us what happened at the Cave of Trophonius."

I glanced at Meg. I was afraid if I recounted our horrible adventures, she might crawl under the table with her plate and snarl at us if we tried to get her out.

She merely belched. "Don't remember much. Go ahead."

I explained how I had collapsed the Cave of the Oracle at Trophonius's request. Josephine and Emmie did not look pleased, but they didn't yell or scream, either. Josephine's submachine gun stayed safely in its gun cabinet in the kitchen. I could only hope my father, Zeus, would react as calmly when he learned I'd destroyed the Oracle.

Emmie scanned the main hall. "Now that I think of it, I haven't seen Agamethus since before the battle. Has anyone?"

No one reported sighting a headless orange ghost.

Emmie stroked her daughter's hair. "I don't mind the Oracle being destroyed, but I worry about Georgie. She's always felt connected to that place. And Agamethus…she likes him a lot."

I looked at the sleeping girl. I tried, for the millionth time, to see some resemblance to godly me, but it would have been easier to believe she was related to Lester Papadopoulos.

"The last thing I want," I said, "is to cause more pain to Georgina. I think, though, the destruction of the cave was necessary. Not just for us. But for her. It may free her to move forward."

I remembered the dark crayon drawings on the girl's wall, made in the throes of her prophetic lunacy. I hoped, perhaps, that by sending me away with that ugly pipe cleaner man, Georgie was attempting to send away her entire experience. With a few cans of pastel paint, Josephine and Emmie could now give her a fresh canvas of bedroom walls.

Emmie and Josephine exchanged a look. They seemed to come to silent agreement.

"All right, then," Josephine said. "About the prophecy…"

Calypso read the sonnet aloud. It sounded no more cheerful than it had before.

Thalia spun her knife. "The first stanza mentions the new moon."

"Time limit," Leo guessed. "Always a dang time limit."

"But the next new moon is in only five nights," Thalia said.

Trust a Hunter of Artemis to keep track of the phases of the moon.

No one jumped up and down in glee. No one shouted, *Hooray! Another catastrophe to stop in just five days!*

"*Bodies filling up the Tiber*." Emmie hugged her daughter closer. "I assume the Tiber refers to the Little Tiber, the barrier of Camp Jupiter in California."

Leo frowned. "Yeah. The changeling lord…that's gotta be my homeboy Frank Zhang. And the Devil's Mount, that's Mount Diablo, right near the camp. I hate Mount Diablo. I fought Enchiladas there once."

Josephine looked like she wanted to ask what he meant, then wisely decided not to. "So the demigods of New Rome are about to be attacked."

I shivered, partly because of the words of the prophecy, partly because of the Tofurky gravy dribbling down Meg's chin. "I believe the first stanza is all of a piece. It mentions *the words that memory wrought.* Ella the harpy is at Camp Jupiter, using her photographic memory to reconstruct the lost books of the Cumaean Sybil."

Meg wiped her chin. "Huh?"

"The details aren't important right now." I gestured for her to continue eating. "My guess is that the Triumvirate means to eliminate the threat by burning down the camp. *The words that memory wrought are set to fire*."

Calypso frowned. "Five days. How do we warn them in time? All our means of communication are down."

I found this irritating in the extreme. As a god, I could have snapped my fingers and instantly sent a message across the world using the winds, or dreams, or a manifestation of my glorious self. Now, we were crippled. The only gods who had shown me any sort of favor were Artemis and Britomartis, but I couldn't expect them to do more—not without them incurring punishment as bad as what Zeus had done to me. I wouldn't wish that even on Britomartis.

As for mortal technology, it was useless to us. In our hands, phones malfunctioned and blew up (I mean, even more than they did for mortals). Computers melted down. I had considered pulling a random mortal off the street and saying, *Hey, make a call for me*. But who would they call? Another random person in California? How would the message get through to Camp Jupiter when most mortals couldn't *find* Camp Jupiter? Besides, even attempting this would put innocent mortals at risk of monster attacks, death by lightning bolt, and exorbitant data-plan overage fees.

I glanced at Thalia. "Can the Hunters cover that much ground?"

"In five days?" She frowned. "If we broke all the speed limits, perhaps. If we suffered no attacks along the way—"

"Which never happens," Emmie said.

Thalia laid her knife on the table. "The bigger problem is that the Hunters

must continue their own quest. We have to find the Teumessian Fox."

I stared at her. I was tempted to ask Meg to order me to slap myself, just to make sure I wasn't stuck in a nightmare. "The Teumessian Fox? *That's* the monster you've been hunting?"

"Afraid so."

"But that's impossible! Also horrible!"

"Foxes are cute," Meg offered. "What's the problem?"

I was tempted to explain how many cities the Teumessian Fox had leveled in ancient times, how it gorged on the blood of its victims and ripped apart armies of Greek warriors, but I didn't want to ruin anyone's Tofurky dinner.

"The point is," I said, "Thalia's right. We cannot ask the Hunters to help us any more than they already have. They've got their own problem to solve."

"That's copacetic," Leo said. "You've done enough for us, T."

Thalia inclined her head. "All in a day's work, Valdez. But you do owe me a bottle of the Texas hot sauce you were telling me about."

"That can be arranged," Leo promised.

Josephine crossed her arms. "Well and good, but we're left with the same dilemma. How do we get a message to California in five days?"

"Me," Leo said.

We all stared at him.

"Leo," Calypso said. "It took us six weeks just to get here from New York."

"Yeah, but with three passengers," he said. "And…no offense, one of them was a former god who was attracting us all kinds of negative attention."

I could not argue with that. Most of the enemies who had attacked us on our journey had introduced themselves by screaming, *There's Apollo! Kill him!*

"I travel fast and light," Leo said. "I've covered that much distance before by myself. I can do it."

Calypso did not look pleased. Her complexion turned just a shade lighter than her yellow legal pad.

"Hey, *mamacita*, I'll come back," he promised. "I'll just enroll late for the spring semester! You can help me catch up on my homework."

"I hate you," she grumbled.

Leo squeezed her hand. "Besides, it'll be good to see Hazel and Frank again. And Reyna, too, though that girl still scares me."

I assumed Calypso was not *too* upset by this plan, since aerial spirits did not pick up Leo and hurl him through the rose window.

Thalia Grace gestured to the notepad. "So we've got one stanza figured out. Yippee. What about the rest?"

"I'm afraid," I said, "the rest is about Meg and me."

“Yep,” Meg agreed. “Pass the biscuits?”

Josephine handed her the basket, then watched in awe as Meg stuffed her mouth with one fluffy biscuit after another.

“So the line about the sun going southward,” Josephine said. “That’s you, Apollo.”

“Obviously,” I agreed. “The third emperor must be somewhere in the American Southwest, in a *land of scorching death*. We get there through mazes —”

“The Labyrinth,” Meg said.

I shuddered. Our last trip through the Labyrinth was still fresh in my mind—winding up in the caverns of Delphi, listening to my old enemy Python slithering and hissing right above our heads. I hoped this time, at least, Meg and I would not be bound together for a three-legged race.

“Somewhere in the Southwest,” I continued, “we must find the crossword speaker. I believe that refers to the Erythraean Sybil, another ancient Oracle. I…I don’t remember much about her—”

“Surprise,” Meg grumbled.

“But she was known to issue her prophecies in acrostics—word puzzles.”

Thalia winced. “Sounds bad. Annabeth told me how she met the Sphinx in the Labyrinth once. Riddles, mazes, puzzles…No thanks. Give me something I can shoot.”

Georgina whimpered in her sleep.

Emmie kissed the girl’s forehead. “And the third emperor?” she asked. “Do you know who it is?”

I turned over phrases of the prophecy in my mind—*master of the swift white horse.* That didn’t narrow it down. Most Roman emperors liked to portray themselves as victorious generals riding their steeds through Rome. Something unsettled me about that third stanza: *to westward palace, in thine own enemy’s boots.* I could not wrap my mental fingers around the answer.

“Meg,” I said, “what about the line *Demeter’s daughter finds her ancient roots*? Do you have any family in the Southwest? Do you remember ever going there before?”

She gave me a guarded look. “Nah.”

Then she shoved another biscuit in her mouth like an act of rebellion: *Make me talk now, sucker.*

“Hey, though.” Leo snapped his fingers. “That next line, *The cloven guide alone the way does know.* That means you get a satyr? They’re guides, aren’t they, like Coach Hedge was? That’s, like, their thing.”

“True,” Josephine said. “But we haven’t seen a satyr in these parts since—”

“Decades,” Emmie finished.

Meg gulped down her wad o’ carbs. “I’ll find us one.”

I scowled. “How?”

“Just will.”

Meg McCaffrey, a girl of few words and much belching.

Calypso flipped to the next page of her notepad. “That just leaves the closing couplet: *When three are known and Tiber reached alive, / ’Tis only then Apollo starts to jive.*”

Leo snapped his fingers and began dancing in his seat. “About time, man. Lester needs more jive.”

“Hmph.” I did not feel like getting into that topic. I was still sore that Earth, Wind & Fire had rejected my audition in 1973 because I was jive-deficient. “I believe those lines mean we will soon know the identity of all three emperors. Once our next quest is complete in the Southwest, Meg and I can travel to Camp Jupiter, reaching the Tiber alive. Then, I hope, I can find the path back to my former glory.”

“By…*jive talkin’*,” Leo sang.

“Shut up,” I grumbled.

No one offered any further interpretations of the sonnet. No one volunteered to take on my perilous quest duties for me.

“Well!” Josephine patted the dining table. “Who wants carrot cake with blowtorched meringue for dessert?”

The Hunters of Artemis left that night at moonrise.

As tired as I was, I felt the need to see them off. I found Thalia Grace in the roundabout, overseeing her Hunters as they saddled a herd of liberated combat ostriches.

“You trust them to ride?” I had thought only Meg McCaffrey was that crazy.

Thalia arched her eyebrows. “It’s not their fault they were trained for combat. We’ll ride them for a while, recondition them, then find a safe place to release them where they can live in peace. We’re used to dealing with wild animals.”

Already the Hunters had freed the ostriches from their helmets and razor wire. The steel fang implants had been removed from their beaks, making the birds look much more comfortable and (slightly) less murderous.

Jimmy moved among the herd, stroking their necks and speaking to them in soothing tones. He was immaculate in his brown suit, completely unscathed from the morning’s battle. His strange bronze hockey-stick weapon was nowhere

to be seen. So the mysterious Olujime was a pit fighter, an accountant, a magical warrior, and an ostrich whisperer. Somehow I was not surprised.

"Is he going with you?" I asked.

Thalia laughed. "No. Just helping us get ready. Seems like a good guy, but I don't think he's Hunter material. He's not even, uh…a Greek-Roman type, is he? I mean, he's not a legacy of you guys, the Olympians."

"No," I agreed. "He is from a different tradition and parentage entirely."

Thalia's short spiky hair rippled in the wind, as if reacting to her uneasiness. "You mean from other gods."

"Of course. He mentioned the Yoruba, though I admit I know very little about their ways."

"How is that possible? Other pantheons of gods, side by side?"

I shrugged. I was often surprised by mortals' limited imaginations, as if the world was an *either/or* proposition. Sometimes humans seemed as stuck in their thinking as they were in their meat-sack bodies. Not, mind you, that gods were much better.

"How could it *not* be possible?" I countered. "In ancient times, this was common sense. Each country, sometimes each city, had its own pantheon of gods. We Olympians have always been used to living in close proximity to, ah… the competition."

"So you're the sun god," Thalia said. "But some other deity from some other culture is *also* the sun god?"

"Exactly. Different manifestations of the same truth."

"I don't get it."

I spread my hands. "Honestly, Thalia Grace, I don't know how to explain it any better. But surely you've been a demigod long enough to know: the longer you live, the weirder the world gets."

Thalia nodded. No demigod could argue with that statement.

"So listen," she said. "When you're out west, if you get to LA, my brother Jason is there. He's going to school with his girlfriend, Piper McLean."

"I will check on them," I promised. "And send your love."

Her shoulder muscles unknotted. "Thanks. And if I talk to Lady Artemis…"

"Yes." I tried to swallow down the sob in my throat. Oh, how I missed my sister. "Give her my best."

She extended her hand. "Good luck, Apollo."

"To you as well. Happy foxhunting."

Thalia laughed bitterly. "I doubt it will be happy, but thanks."

The last I saw the Hunters of Artemis, they were trotting down South Illinois Street on a herd of ostriches, heading west as if chasing the crescent moon.

42

Pancakes for the road
Need a guide for your journey?
Check the tomatoes

THE NEXT MORNING, Meg kicked me awake. “Time to get going.”

My eyelids fluttered open. I sat up, groaning. When you are the sun god, it’s a rare treat to be able to sleep late. Now here I was, a mere mortal, and people kept waking me up at the crack of dawn. I’d spent millennia *being* the crack of dawn. I was tired of it.

Meg stood at my bedside in her pajamas and red high-tops (good gods, did she *sleep* in them?), her nose running as always, and a half-eaten green apple in her hand.

“I don’t suppose you brought me breakfast?” I asked.

“I can throw this apple at you.”

“Never mind. I’ll get up.”

Meg went off to take a shower. Yes, sometimes she actually did that. I dressed and packed as best I could, then headed to the kitchen.

While I ate my pancakes (yum), Emmie hummed and banged around in the kitchen. Georgina sat across from me coloring pictures, her heels kicking against her chair legs. Josephine stood at her welding station, happily fusing plates of sheet metal. Calypso and Leo—who refused to say good-bye to me on the assumption that we would all see each other soon—stood at the kitchen counter, arguing about what Leo should pack for his trip to Camp Jupiter and throwing bacon at each other. It all felt so cozy and homey, I wanted to volunteer to wash dishes if it meant getting to stay another day.

Lityerses sat down next to me with a large cup of coffee. His battle wounds had been mostly patched up, though his face still looked like the runway system at Heathrow Airport.

“I’ll watch after them.” He gestured at Georgina and her mothers.

I doubted Josephine or Emmie wanted to be “watched after,” but I did not point that out to Lityerses. He would have to learn on his own how to adapt to this environment. Even I, the glorious Apollo, sometimes had to discover new things.

“I’m sure you’ll do well here,” I said. “I trust you.”

He laughed bitterly. “I don’t see why.”

“We share common ground—we’re both sons of overbearing fathers, and we’ve been misled and burdened by bad choices, but we’re talented in our chosen ways.”

“And good-looking?” He gave me a twisted smile.

“Naturally that. Yes.”

He cupped his hands around his coffee. “Thank you. For the second chance.”

“I believe in them. And third and fourth chances. But I only forgive each person once a millennium, so don’t mess up for the next thousand years.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

Behind him, in the nearest hallway, I saw a flicker of ghostly orange light. I excused myself and went to say another difficult good-bye.

Agamethus hovered in front of a window overlooking the roundabout. His glowing tunic rippled in an ethereal wind. He pressed one hand against the windowsill as if holding himself in place. His other hand held the Magic 8 Ball.

“I’m glad you’re still here,” I said.

He had no face to read, but his posture seemed sad and resigned.

“You know what happened at the Cave of Trophonius,” I guessed. “You know he is gone.”

He bowed in acknowledgement.

“Your brother asked me to tell you he loves you,” I said. “He is sorry about your fate.

“I want to apologize, too. When you died, I did not listen to Trophonius’s prayer to save you. I felt you two deserved to face the consequences of that robbery. But this…this has been a very long punishment. Perhaps too long.”

The ghost did not respond. His form flickered as if the ethereal wind was strengthening, pulling him away.

“If you wish,” I said, “when I attain my godhood again, I will personally visit the Underworld. I will petition Hades to let your soul pass on to Elysium.”

Agamethus offered me his 8 Ball.

“Ah.” I took the sphere and shook it one last time. “What is your wish, Agamethus?”

The answer floated up through the water, a dense block of words on the small white die face: I WILL GO WHERE I MUST. I WILL FIND TROPHONIUS. TAKE CARE

OF EACH OTHER, AS MY BROTHER AND I COULD NOT.

He released his grip on the windowsill. The wind took him, and Agamethus dissolved into motes in the sunlight.

The sun had risen by the time I joined Meg McCaffrey on the roof of the Waystation.

She wore the green dress Sally Jackson had given her, as well as her yellow leggings, now mended and clean. All the mud and guano had been scrubbed from her high-tops. On either side of her face, rainbow-colored pipe cleaners twisted through her hair—no doubt a parting fashion gift from Georgina.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

Meg crossed her arms and stared at Hemithea's tomato patch. "Yeah. Okay."

By which I think she meant: *I just went insane and spewed prophecies and almost died. How are you asking me this question and expecting me not to punch you?*

"So…what is your plan?" I asked. "Why the roof? If we are seeking the Labyrinth, shouldn't we be on the ground floor?"

"We need a satyr."

"Yes, but…" I looked around. I saw no goat men growing in any of Emmie's planting beds. "How do you intend—?"

"Shhh."

She crouched next to the tomato plants and pressed her hand against the dirt. The soil rumbled and began to heave upward. For a moment, I feared a new karpos might burst forth with glowing red eyes and a vocabulary that consisted entirely of *Tomatoes!*

Instead, the plants parted. The dirt rolled away, revealing the form of a young man sleeping on his side. He looked about seventeen, perhaps younger. He wore a black collarless jacket over a green shirt, and jeans much too baggy for his legs. Over his curly hair flopped a red knit cap. A scruffy goatee clung to his chin. At the tops of his sneakers, his ankles were covered in thick brown fur. Either this young man enjoyed shag-carpet socks, or he was a satyr passing for human.

He looked vaguely familiar. Then I noticed what he cradled in his arms—a white paper food bag from Enchiladas del Rey. Ah, yes. The satyr who enjoyed enchiladas. It had been a few years, but I remembered him now.

I turned to Meg in amazement. "This is one of the more *important* satyrs, a Lord of the Wild, in fact. How did you find him?"

She shrugged. "I just searched for the right satyr. Guess that's him."

The satyr woke with a start. “I didn’t eat them!” he yelped. “I was just…” He blinked and sat up, a stream of potting soil trickling from his cap. “Wait…this isn’t Palm Springs. Where am I?”

I smiled. “Hello, Grover Underwood. I am Apollo. This is Meg. And you, my lucky friend, have been summoned to lead us through the Labyrinth.”

GUIDE TO APOLLO-SPEAK

Aegis a shield used by Thalia Grace that has a fear-inducing image of Medusa on its front; it turns into a silver bracelet when she isn't using it

Aethiopian Bull a giant, aggressive African bull whose red hide is impervious to all metal weapons

Agamethus son of King Erginus; half brother of Trophonius, who decapitated him to avoid discovery after their raid on King Hyrieus's treasury

Amazon a member of a tribe of warrior women

amphitheater an oval or circular open-air space used for performances or sporting events, with spectator seating built in a semicircle around the stage

amphora ceramic jar used to hold wine

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena

Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Apollo

Asclepius the god of medicine; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing center of ancient Greece

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom

Athenian of the city of Athens, Greece

Atlas a Titan; father of Calypso and Zoë Nightshade; he was condemned to hold up the sky for eternity after the war between the Titans and the Olympians; he tried unsuccessfully to trick Hercules into taking his place forever, but Hercules tricked him in return

blemmyae a tribe of headless people with faces in their chests

Britomartis the Greek goddess of hunting and fishing nets; her sacred animal is the griffin

Bruttia Crispina a Roman Empress from 178 to 191 CE; she was married to future Roman Emperor Commodus when she was sixteen years old; after ten years of marriage, she was banished to Capri for adultery and later killed

Byzantium an ancient Greek colony that later became Constantinople (now Istanbul)

caduceus the traditional symbol of Hermes, featuring two snakes winding around an often winged staff

Calliope the muse of epic poetry; mother of several sons, including Orpheus

Calypso the goddess nymph of the mythical island of Ogygia; a daughter of the Titan Atlas; she detained the hero Odysseus for many years

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located in Long Island, New York

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills, in California

Carthaginian Serpent a 120-foot snake that emerged from the River Bagrada in North Africa to confront Roman General Marcus Atilius Regulus and his troops during the First Punic War

Cave of Trophonius a deep chasm, home to the Oracle of Trophonius

centaur a race of creatures that is half-human, half-horse

centicore (*see also* **yale**) a fierce yak-like creature with large horns that can swivel in any direction

Chiron a centaur; the camp activities director at Camp Half-Blood

chiton a Greek garment; a sleeveless piece of linen or wool secured at the shoulders by brooches and at the waist by a belt

Cloacina goddess of the Roman sewer system

Colosseum an elliptical amphitheater in the center of Rome, Italy, capable of seating fifty thousand spectators; used for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles; also called the Flavian Amphitheater

Colossus Neronis (Colossus of Nero) a gigantic bronze statue of the Emperor Nero; was later transformed into the sun god with the addition of a sunray crown

Commodus Lucius Aurelius Commodus was the son of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; he became co-emperor when he was sixteen and emperor at eighteen, when his father died; he ruled from 177 to 192 CE and was megalomaniacal and corrupt; he considered himself the New Hercules and enjoyed killing animals and fighting gladiators at the Colosseum

Cretan of the island of Crete

Cyclops (Cyclopes, pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

Daedalus a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept

daimon Greek for *demon*; an intermediary spirit between mortals and the gods

Dambe a centuries-old form of boxing associated with the Hausa people of West Africa

Danubian bordering the Danube river in Europe

Daphne a beautiful naiad who attracted Apollo's attention; she was transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape him

Delos a Greek island in the Aegean Sea near Mykonos; birthplace of Apollo

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos

Demophon the baby son of King Celeus, whom Demeter nursed and tried to make immortal as an act of kindness; brother of Triptolemus

Dionysus the Greek god of wine and revelry; the son of Zeus

Dionysus Festival a celebration held in Athens, Greece, to honor the god Dionysus, the central events of which were theatrical performances

Doors of Death the doorway to the House of Hades, located in Tartarus; doors have two sides—one in the mortal world, and one in the Underworld

elomìíràn the Yoruba word for *others*

Elysium the paradise to which Greek heroes were sent when the gods gave them immortality

Erythaea an island where the Cumaean Sibyl, a love interest of Apollo, originally lived before he convinced her to leave it by promising her a long life

Eubouleus son of Demeter and Karmanor; the Greek god of swineherds

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where people who were evil during their lives are sent to face eternal punishment for their crimes after death

Flavian the Flavians were an imperial dynasty that ruled the Roman Empire between 69 and 96 CE

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; wife of Ouranos; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters

Germani (***Germanus***, sing.) tribal people who settled to the west of the Rhine river

Gidigbo a form of wrestling that involves head-butting, from the Yoruba of Nigeria, Africa

gloutos Greek for *buttocks*

Gorgons three monstrous sisters (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa) who have hair of living, venomous snakes; Medusa's eyes can turn the beholder to stone

Greek fire an incendiary weapon used in naval battles because it can continue burning in water

griffin a winged creature with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion; the sacred animal of Britomartis

Grove of Dodona the site of the oldest Greek Oracle, second only to Delphi in importance; the rustling of trees in the grove provided answers to priests and priestesses who journeyed to the site

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; ruler of the Underworld

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hausa a language spoken in northern Nigeria and Niger; also the name of a people

Hecate goddess of magic and crossroads

Hemithea teenage daughter of King Staphylus of Naxos; sister of Parthenos; Apollo made her and her sister divine to save them when they jumped off a cliff to escape their father's rage

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister; Apollo's stepmother

Heracles the Greek equivalent of Hercules; the son of Zeus and Alcmene; the strongest of all mortals

Hercules the Roman equivalent of Heracles; the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, who was born with great strength

Hermes Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication

Hessian mercenaries the approximately thirty thousand German troops hired by the British to help fight during the American Revolution when they found it too difficult to recruit their own soldiers

hippocampi (hippocampus, sing.) half-horse, half-fish creatures

Hunters of Artemis a group of maidens loyal to Artemis and gifted with hunting skills and eternal youth as long as they reject romance for life

Hyacinthus a Greek hero and Apollo's lover, who died while trying to impress Apollo with his discus skills

ichor the golden fluid that is the blood of gods and immortals

ìgboyà the Yoruba word for *confidence*, *boldness*, and *bravery*

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Iris the Greek goddess of the rainbow, and a messenger of the gods

Julius Caesar a Roman politician and general who became a dictator of Rome, turning it from a republic into the Roman Empire

Karmanor a minor Greek harvest god; a local deity in Crete who married Demeter; together they had a son, Eubouleus, who became the god of swineherds

karpoi (***karpos***, sing.) grain spirits

Kronos the youngest of the twelve Titans; the son of Ouranos and Gaea; the father of Zeus; he killed his father at his mother's bidding; Titan lord of fate, harvest, justice, and time

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur

Lethe the Greek word for *forgetfulness*; the name of a river in the Underworld whose waters caused forgetfulness; the name of a Greek spirit of oblivion

Leto mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood

Little Tiber the barrier of Camp Jupiter

Lityerses the son of King Midas; he challenged people to harvesting contests and beheaded those he beat, earning him the nickname "Reaper of Men"

Marcus Aurelius Roman Emperor from 161 to 180 CE; father of Commodus; considered the last of the "Five Good Emperors"

Marsyas a satyr who lost to Apollo after challenging him in a musical contest, which led to Marsyas being flayed alive

melomakarona Greek Christmas honey cookies

Midas a king with the power to transform anything he touched to gold; Lityerses's father; he selected Marsyas as the winner in the musical contest between Apollo and Marsyas, resulting in Apollo giving Midas the ears of a donkey

Minotaur the half-man, half-bull son of King Minos of Crete; the Minotaur was kept in the Labyrinth, where he killed people who were sent in; he was finally defeated by Theseus

Mnemosyne Titan goddess of memory; daughter of Ouranos and Gaea

Mount Olympus home of the Twelve Olympians

Mount Othrys a mountain in central Greece; the Titans' base during the ten-year war between the Titans and the Olympians

myrmeke a large antlike creature that poisons and paralyzes its prey before eating it; known for protecting various metals, particularly gold

Narcissus a hunter known for his beauty; the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope; he was vain, arrogant, and disdainful of admirers; he fell in love with his own reflection; Narcissus was also the name of

Commodus's personal trainer and wrestling partner, who drowned the emperor in his bathtub—these were two different Narcissuses

Nemean Lion a large, vicious lion that plagued Nemea in Greece; its pelt was impervious to all human weapons; Hercules strangled it with his bare hands

Nero ruled as Roman Emperor from 54 to 58 CE; he had his mother and his first wife put to death; many believe he was responsible for setting a fire that gutted Rome, but he blamed the Christians, whom he burned on crosses; he built an extravagant new palace on the cleared land and lost support when construction expenses forced him to raise taxes; he committed suicide

Nine Muses Greek goddesses of literature, science, and the arts, who have inspired artists and writers for centuries

nymph a female nature deity who animates nature

Oceanus the eldest son of Ouranos and Gaea; the Titan god of the sea

Ogygia the island home—and prison—of the nymph Calypso

Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo

Oracle of Trophonius a Greek who was transformed into an Oracle after his death; located at the Cave of Trophonius; known for terrifying those who seek him

Orion a giant huntsman who was the most loyal and valued of Artemis's attendants until he was slain by a scorpion

Ouranos the Greek personification of the sky; husband of Gaea; father of the Titans

Pan the Greek god of the wild; the son of Hermes

Parthenos teenage daughter of King Staphylus of Naxos; sister of Hemithea; Apollo made her and her sister divine to save them when they jumped off a cliff to escape their father's rage

Peloponnese a large peninsula and geographic region in southern Greece, separated from the northern part of the country by the Gulf of Corinth

Persephone the Greek queen of the Underworld; wife of Hades; daughter of Zeus and Demeter

podex Latin for *anus*

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades

Potina a Roman goddess of children, who watches over what they are drinking

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

Primordial Chaos the first thing ever to exist; the miasma from which the Fates wove the future; a void from which the first gods were produced

princeps prince of Rome; the early emperors used this title for themselves

Python a monstrous serpent that Gaea appointed to guard the Oracle at Delphi

River Styx the river that forms the boundary between earth and the Underworld

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man

Sibyl a prophetess

Sibylline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek

Sparta a city-state in ancient Greece with military dominance

spatha a long sword used by Roman cavalry units

Staphylus king of Naxos, Greece; a demigod son of Dionysus; father of Hemithea and Parthenos

Styx a powerful water nymph; the eldest daughter of the sea Titan, Oceanus; goddess of the Underworld's most important river; goddess of hatred; the River Styx is named after her

Suburra an area of the city of Rome that was crowded and lower-class

Tantalus a king who fed the gods a stew made of his own son; he was sent to the Underworld, where his curse was to be stuck in a pool of water under a fruit tree but never be able to drink or eat

Tartarus husband of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; the lowest part of the Underworld

Teumessian Fox a giant fox sent by the gods to ravage the city of Thebes in punishment for a crime; the beast was destined never to be caught

Three Fates Even before there were gods there were the Fates: Clotho, who spins the thread of life; Lachesis, the measurer, who determines how long a life will be; and Atropos, who cuts the thread of life with her shears

Three Mile Island a nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where, on March 28, 1979, there was a partial meltdown in reactor number 2, causing public concern

Throne of Memory Mnemosyne carved this chair, in which a petitioner would sit after visiting the Cave of Trophonius and receiving bits of verse from the Oracle; once seated in the chair, the petitioner would recount the verses, the priests would write them down, and they would become a prophecy

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy; Rome was founded on its banks; in ancient Rome, executed criminals were thrown into the river

Titan War the epic ten-year battle between the Titans and the Olympians that resulted in the Olympians taking the throne

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Ouranos, that ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

Triptolemus son of King Celeus and brother of Demophon; a favorite of Demeter; he became the inventor of the plow and agriculture

trireme a Greek warship, having three tiers of oars on each side

triumvirate a political alliance formed by three parties

Trojan War According to legend, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta

Trophonius demigod son of Apollo, designer of Apollo's temple at Delphi, and spirit of the dark Oracle; he decapitated his half brother Agamethus to avoid discovery after their raid on King Hyrieus's treasury

Troy a Roman city situated in modern-day Turkey; site of the Trojan War

Underworld the kingdom of the dead, where souls go for eternity; ruled by Hades

Via Appia the Appian Way, one of the first and most important roads of the ancient Roman republic; after the Roman army subdued the revolt led by Spartacus in 73 BC, they crucified more than six thousand slaves and lined the road for 130 miles with their bodies

yale (*see also* **centicore**) a fierce yak-like creature with large horns that can swivel in any direction

Yoruba one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, Africa; also a language and a religion of the Yoruba people

Zeus the Greek god of the sky and the king of the gods

Zoë Nightshade a daughter of Atlas who was exiled and later joined the Hunters of Artemis, becoming the loyal lieutenant of Artemis

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3

THE BURNING MAZE

PRAISE FOR RICK RIORDAN

Percy Jackson and the Olympians

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"Perfectly paced, with electrifying moments chasing each other like heartbeats."
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—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

The Titan's Curse

"All in all, a winner of Olympic proportions."
—*School Library Journal*

The Battle of the Labyrinth

★ "Look no further for the next Harry Potter; meet Percy Jackson, as legions of fans already have."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

The Last Olympian

"The hordes of young readers who have devoured Rick Riordan's books…will no doubt gulp down this concluding volume as greedily as they would a plateful of ambrosia, or maybe pizza."
—*The Wall Street Journal*

The Heroes of Olympus

Book One: The Lost Hero

"Percy Jackson fans can rest easy: this first book in Riordan's Heroes of Olympus spin-off series is a fast-paced adventure with enough familiar elements to immediately hook those eager to revisit his modern world of mythological mayhem. Rotating among his three protagonists, Riordan's storytelling is as

polished as ever, brimming with wit, action, and heart—his devotees won't be disappointed."
—Publishers Weekly

"With appealing new characters within a familiar framework, this spin-off will satisfy the demand for more."
—Booklist

"Riordan excels at clever plot devices and at creating an urgent sense of cliff-hanging danger. His interjection of humor by incongruous juxtaposition… provides some welcome relief. The young heroes deal with issues familiar to teens today: Who am I? Can I live up to the expectations of others? Having read the first series is helpful but not essential, and the complex plot is made for sequels."
—School Library Journal

"Riordan extends the franchise in a logical direction while maximizing the elements that made the first series so popular: irreverent heroes, plenty of tension-filled moments fighting monsters, and authentic classical mythology mixed in with modern life. Completely in control of pacing and tone, he balances a faultless comic banter against deeper notes that reveal the characters' vulnerabilities. With Percy Jackson slated to make an appearance in later volumes, fans nostalgic for the old books should find in this new series everything they've been pining for."
—Horn Book

Percy Jackson's Greek Gods

"Percy's gift, which is no great secret, is to breathe new life into the gods. Closest attention is paid to the Olympians, but Riordan has a sure touch when it comes to fitting much into a small space—as does Rocco's artwork, which smokes and writhes on the page as if hit by lightning….The inevitable go-to for Percy's legions of fans who want the stories behind his stories."
—Kirkus Reviews

"The age-old stories are endlessly strong, resonant, and surprising, while the

telling here is fresh, irreverent, and amusing. A must-have for the Percy Jackson canon."
—Booklist

Percy Jackson's Greek Heroes

"…the most voluble of Poseidon's many sons dishes on a dozen more ancient relatives and fellow demigods. Riordan leavens full, refreshingly tart accounts of the ups and downs of such higher-profile heroes as Theseus, Orpheus, Hercules, and Jason with the lesser-known but often equally awesome exploits of such butt-kicking ladies as Atalanta, Otrera (the first Amazon), and lion-wrestling Cyrene. The breezy treatment effectively blows off…the dust obscuring the timeless themes in each hero's career."
—Kirkus Reviews

"Written in the voice of Percy Jackson, these ancient stories sound fresh and vital. Like its predecessor, this large, handsome tome…will fly off library shelves."
—Booklist

The Kane Chronicles

Book One: The Red Pyramid

★ "The first volume in the Kane Chronicles, this fantasy adventure delivers what fans loved about the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series: young protagonists with previously unsuspected magical powers, a riveting story marked by headlong adventure, a complex background rooted in ancient mythology, and wry, witty twenty-first-century narration."
—Booklist (starred review)

"This tale explodes into action from chapter one….Readers pining for Percy Jackson will find new heroes in Carter and Sadie Kane."
—Kirkus Reviews

★ "A truly original take on Egyptian mythology…A must-have book."
—School Library Journal (starred review)

“Once again, Riordan masterfully meshes modern life with mythology and history, reinvigorating dusty artifacts such as the Rosetta stone and revitalizing ancient Egyptian story lines.”
—*The Los Angeles Times*

Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard

Book One: The Sword of Summer

“Rick Riordan’s new series is simply brilliant—maybe his best yet! I thought I knew Norse mythology, but now that I’ve read the gripping and hilarious *Sword of Summer*, I’ll never see Thor the same way again. Get ready to stay up all night reading!”
—*New York Times* #1 best-selling author Harlan Coben

“*The Sword of Summer* is a propulsive, kinetic, witty rebooting of Norse mythology with all the charm of the Percy Jackson novels. Instantly likeable heroes! Insane action! Cool villains! A twisting, turning, always exciting story! Rick Riordan does it again, even better.”
—*New York Times* best-selling author Michael Grant

“*The Sword of Summer* combines the glory of Norse myth with the joy of Rick Riordan’s effervescent world-building. One of Riordan’s funniest books—everything from the chapter titles to the wry humor of Magnus Chase will have you chuckling; even as the plot races along at breakneck speed. Check me into the Hotel Valhalla, please. I’ll be staying.”
—*New York Times* #1 best-selling author Cassandra Clare

“With an epic plot, engaging (and diverse) characters, and tones of wisecracking humor, Riordan’s latest is a page-turner. Those new to the author’s past series can jump right in; fans of his previous works will be happy to see clever nods and references to the other in-universe books.”
—*School Library Journal*

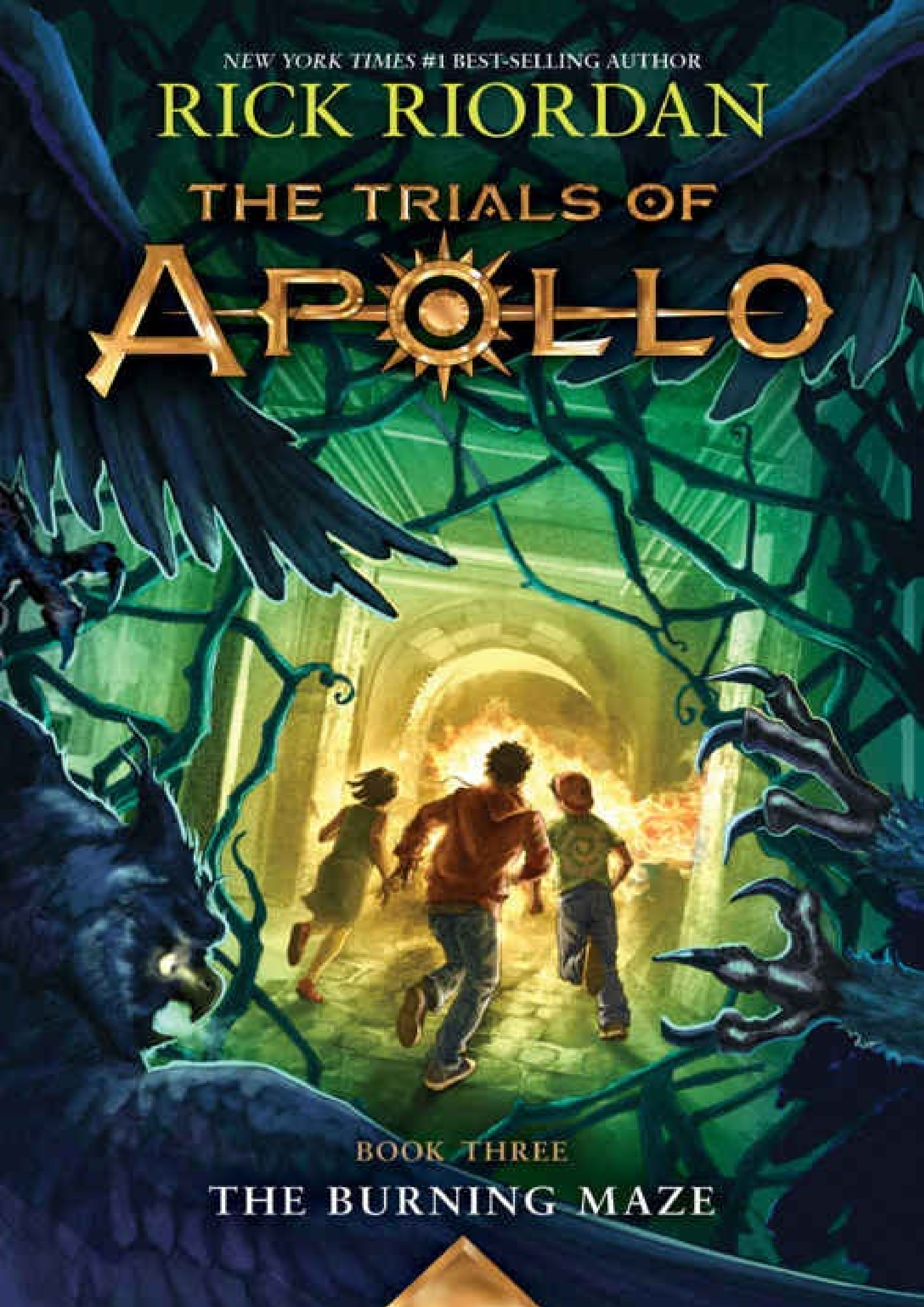
“[A] whirlwind of myth, action, and wry sarcasm, perfect for readers hungry for a new hit of that Percy Jackson–type magic.”
—*Horn Book*

“Riordan offers a terrific cast that is effortlessly diverse—all of the allies stand as independent, well-constructed characters who each bring entirely different skills, histories, interests, and personalities to the group. Riordan fans will be thrilled, and Norse mythology buffs will be pleased to see that his focus has shifted to their faves.”

—Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN, dubbed “storyteller of the gods” by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series. He is best known for his Percy Jackson and the Olympians books, which bring Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. He expanded on that series with two more: the Heroes of Olympus and the Trials of Apollo, which cleverly combine Greek and Roman gods and heroes with his beloved modern characters. Rick also tackled the ancient Egyptian gods in the magic-filled Kane Chronicles trilogy, and Norse mythology in the otherworldly Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard series. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures as well as his two #1 best-selling myth collections, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods* and *Percy Jackson’s Greek Heroes*. Rick lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. For more information, go to www.rickriordan.com, or follow him on Twitter @camphalfblood.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THE TRIALS OF
APOLLO
BOOK THREE
THE BURNING MAZE

RICK RIORDAN

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

3
THE BURNING MAZE

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To Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy
I hope you're pleased with yourself

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The Dark Prophecy

The words that memory wrought are set to fire,
Ere new moon rises o'er the Devil's Mount.
The changeling lord shall face a challenge dire,
Till bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.

Yet southward must the sun now trace its course,
Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death
To find the master of the swift white horse
And wrest from him the crossword speaker's breath.

To westward palace must the Lester go;
Demeter's daughter finds her ancient roots.
The cloven guide alone the way does know,
To walk the path in thine own enemy's boots.

When three are known and Tiber reached alive,
'Tis only then Apollo starts to jive.

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1

Once was Apollo
Now a rat in the Lab'rinth
Send help. And cronuts

NO.

I refuse to share this part of my story. It was the lowest, most humiliating, most awful week in my four-thousand-plus years of life. Tragedy. Disaster. Heartbreak. I will not tell you about it.

Why are you still here? Go away!

But alas, I suppose I have no choice. Doubtless, Zeus *expects* me to tell you the story as part of my punishment.

It's not enough that he turned me, the once divine Apollo, into a mortal teenager with acne, flab, and the alias Lester Papadopoulos. It's not enough that he sent me on a dangerous quest to liberate five great ancient Oracles from a trio of evil Roman emperors. It's not even enough that he enslaved me—his *formerly favorite son*—to a pushy twelve-year-old demigod named Meg!

On top of all that, Zeus wants me to record my shame for posterity.

Very well. But I have warned you. In these pages, only suffering awaits.

Where to begin?

With Grover and Meg, of course.

For two days, we had traveled the Labyrinth—across pits of darkness and around lakes of poison, through dilapidated shopping malls with only discount Halloween stores and questionable Chinese food buffets.

The Labyrinth could be a bewildering place. Like a web of capillaries beneath the skin of the mortal world, it connected basements, sewers, and

forgotten tunnels around the globe with no regard to the rules of time and space. One might enter the Labyrinth through a manhole in Rome, walk ten feet, open a door, and find oneself at a training camp for clowns in Buffalo, Minnesota. (Please don't ask. It was traumatic.)

I would have preferred to avoid the Labyrinth altogether. Sadly, the prophecy we'd received in Indiana had been quite specific: *Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death.* Fun! *The cloven guide alone the way does know.*

Except that our cloven guide, the satyr Grover Underwood, did not seem to know the way.

"You're lost," I said, for the fortieth time.

"Am not!" he protested.

He trotted along in his baggy jeans and green tie-dyed T-shirt, his goat hooves wobbling in his specially modified New Balance 520s. A red knit cap covered his curly hair. Why he thought this disguise helped him better pass for human, I couldn't say. The bumps of his horns were clearly visible beneath the hat. His shoes popped off his hooves several times a day, and I was getting tired of being his sneaker retriever.

He stopped at a T in the corridor. In either direction, rough-hewn stone walls marched into darkness. Grover tugged his wispy goatee.

"Well?" Meg asked.

Grover flinched. Like me, he had quickly come to fear Meg's displeasure.

Not that Meg McCaffrey *looked* terrifying. She was small for her age, with stoplight-colored clothes—green dress, yellow leggings, red high-tops—all torn and dirty thanks to our many crawls through narrow tunnels. Cobwebs streaked her dark pageboy haircut. The lenses of her cat-eye glasses were so grimy I couldn't imagine how she could see. In all, she looked like a kindergartner who had just survived a vicious playground brawl for possession of a tire swing.

Grover pointed to the tunnel on the right. "I—I'm pretty sure Palm Springs is that way."

"Pretty sure?" Meg asked. "Like last time, when we walked into a bathroom and surprised a Cyclops on the toilet?"

"That wasn't my fault!" Grover protested. "Besides, this direction *smells* right. Like…cacti."

Meg sniffed the air. "I don't smell cacti."

"Meg," I said, "the satyr is supposed to be our guide. We don't have much choice but to trust him."

Grover huffed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. Your daily reminder: I didn't *ask* to be magically summoned halfway across the country and to wake up in a rooftop tomato patch in Indianapolis!"

Brave words, but he kept his eyes on the twin rings around Meg's middle fingers, perhaps worried she might summon her golden scimitars and slice him into rotisserie-style cabrito.

Ever since learning that Meg was a daughter of Demeter, the goddess of growing things, Grover Underwood had acted more intimidated by her than by me, a former Olympian deity. Life was not fair.

Meg wiped her nose. "Fine. I just didn't think we'd be wandering around down here for two days. The new moon is in—"

"Three more days," I said, cutting her off. "We know."

Perhaps I was too brusque, but I didn't need a reminder about the other part of the prophecy. While we traveled south to find the next Oracle, our friend Leo Valdez was desperately flying his bronze dragon toward Camp Jupiter, the Roman demigod training ground in Northern California, hoping to warn them about the fire, death, and disaster that supposedly faced them at the new moon.

I tried to soften my tone. "We have to assume Leo and the Romans can handle whatever's coming in the north. We have our own task."

"And plenty of our own fires." Grover sighed.

"Meaning what?" Meg asked.

As he had for the last two days, Grover remained evasive. "Best not to talk about it…here."

He glanced around nervously as if the walls might have ears, which was a distinct possibility. The Labyrinth was a living structure. Judging from the smells that emanated from some of the corridors, I was fairly sure it had a lower intestine at least.

Grover scratched his ribs. "I'll try to get us there fast, guys," he promised. "But the Labyrinth has a mind of its own. Last time I was here, with Percy…"

His expression turned wistful, as it often did when he referred to his old adventures with his best friend, Percy Jackson. I couldn't blame him. Percy was a handy demigod to have around. Unfortunately, he was not as easy to summon from a tomato patch as our satyr guide had been.

I placed my hand on Grover's shoulder. "We know you're doing your best. Let's keep going. And while you're sniffing for cacti, if you could keep your nostrils open for breakfast—perhaps coffee and lemon-maple cronuts—that would be great."

We followed our guide down the right-hand tunnel.

Soon the passage narrowed and tapered, forcing us to crouch and waddle in single file. I stayed in the middle, the safest place to be. You may not find that brave, but Grover was a lord of the Wild, a member of the satyrs' ruling Council of Cloven Elders. Allegedly, he had great powers, though I hadn't seen him use any yet. As for Meg, she could not only dual-wield golden scimitars, but also do amazing things with packets of gardening seeds, which

she'd stocked up on in Indianapolis.

I, on the other hand, had grown weaker and more defenseless by the day. Since our battle with the emperor Commodus, whom I'd blinded with a burst of divine light, I had not been able to summon even the smallest bit of my former godly power. My fingers had grown sluggish on the fret board of my combat ukulele. My archery skills had deteriorated. I'd even missed a shot when I fired at that Cyclops on the toilet. (I'm not sure which of us had been more embarrassed.) At the same time, the waking visions that sometimes paralyzed me had become more frequent and more intense.

I hadn't shared my concerns with my friends. Not yet.

I wanted to believe my powers were simply recharging. Our trials in Indianapolis had nearly destroyed me, after all.

But there was another possibility. I had fallen from Olympus and crash-landed in a Manhattan dumpster in January. It was now March. That meant I had been human for about two months. It was possible that the longer I stayed mortal, the weaker I would become, and the harder it would be to get back to my divine state.

Had it been that way the last two times Zeus exiled me to earth? I couldn't remember. On some days, I couldn't even remember the taste of ambrosia, or the names of my sun-chariot horses, or the face of my twin sister, Artemis. (Normally I would've said that was a blessing, not remembering my sister's face, but I missed her terribly. Don't you *dare* tell her I said that.)

We crept along the corridor, the magical Arrow of Dodona buzzing in my quiver like a silenced phone, as if asking to be taken out and consulted.

I tried to ignore it.

The last few times I'd asked the arrow for advice, it had been unhelpful. Worse, it had been unhelpful in Shakespearean English, with more *thee*s, *thou*s, and *yea*, *verily*s than I could stomach. I'd never liked the '90s. (By which I mean the 1590s.) Perhaps I would confer with the arrow when we made it to Palm Springs. *If* we made it to Palm Springs…

Grover stopped at another T.

He sniffed to the right, then the left. His nose quivered like a rabbit that had just smelled a dog.

Suddenly he yelled "Back!" and threw himself into reverse. The corridor was so narrow he toppled into my lap, which forced me to topple into Meg's lap, who sat down hard with a startled grunt. Before I could complain that I don't *do* group massage, my ears popped. All the moisture was sucked out of the air. An acrid smell rolled over me—like fresh tar on an Arizona highway—and across the corridor in front of us roared a sheet of yellow fire, a pulse of pure heat that stopped as quickly as it had begun.

My ears crackled…possibly from the blood boiling in my head. My mouth was so dry it was impossible to swallow. I couldn't tell if I was

trembling uncontrollably, or if all three of us were.

"Wh—what was that?" I wondered why my first instinct had been to say *who*. Something about that blast had felt horribly familiar. In the lingering bitter smoke, I thought I detected the stench of hatred, frustration, and hunger.

Grover's red knit hat steamed. He smelled of burnt goat hair. "That," he said weakly, "means we're getting close. We need to hurry."

"Like I've been *saying*," Meg grumbled. "Now get off." She kneed me in the butt.

I struggled to rise, at least as far as I could in the cramped tunnel. With the fire gone, my skin felt clammy. The corridor in front of us had gone dark and silent, as if it couldn't possibly have been a vent for hellfire, but I'd spent enough time in the sun chariot to gauge the heat of flames. If we'd been caught in that blast, we would've been ionized into plasma.

"We'll have to go left," Grover decided.

"Um," I said, "left is the direction from which the fire came."

"It's also the quickest way."

"How about backward?" Meg suggested.

"Guys, we're close," Grover insisted. "I can *feel* it. But we've wandered into *his* part of the maze. If we don't hurry—"

Screee!

The noise echoed from the corridor behind us. I wanted to believe it was some random mechanical sound the Labyrinth often generated: a metal door swinging on rusty hinges, or a battery-operated toy from the Halloween clearance store rolling into a bottomless pit. But the look on Grover's face told me what I already suspected: the noise was the cry of a living creature.

SCREEE! The second cry was angrier, and much closer.

I didn't like what Grover had said about us being in *his part of the maze*. Who was *his* referring to? I certainly didn't want to run into a corridor that had an insta-broil setting, but, on the other hand, the cry behind us filled me with terror.

"Run," Meg said.

"Run," Grover agreed.

We bolted down the left-hand tunnel. The only good news: it was slightly larger, allowing us to flee for our lives with more elbow room. At the next crossroads, we turned left again, then took an immediate right. We jumped a pit, climbed a staircase, and raced down another corridor, but the creature behind us seemed to have no trouble following our scent.

SCREEE! it cried from the darkness.

I knew that sound, but my faulty human memory couldn't place it. Some sort of avian creature. Nothing cute like a parakeet or a cockatoo. Something from the infernal regions—dangerous, bloodthirsty, very cranky.

We emerged in a circular chamber that looked like the bottom of a giant well. A narrow ramp spiraled up the side of the rough brick wall. What might be at the top, I couldn't tell. I saw no other exits.

SCREEE!

The cry grated against the bones of my middle ear. The flutter of wings echoed from the corridor behind us—or was I hearing *multiple* birds? Did these things travel in flocks? I had encountered them before. Confound it, I should *know* this!

"What now?" Meg asked. "Up?"

Grover stared into the gloom above, his mouth hanging open. "This doesn't make any sense. This shouldn't be here."

"Grover!" Meg said. "Up or no?"

"Yes, up!" he yelped. "Up is good!"

"No," I said, the back of my neck tingling with dread. "We won't make it. We need to block this corridor."

Meg frowned. "But—"

"Magic plant stuff!" I shouted. "Hurry!"

One thing I will say for Meg: when you need plant stuff done magically, she's your girl. She dug into the pouches on her belt, ripped open a packet of seeds, and flung them into the tunnel.

Grover whipped out his panpipe. He played a lively jig to encourage growth as Meg knelt before the seeds, her face scrunched in concentration.

Together, the lord of the Wild and the daughter of Demeter made a super gardening duo. The seeds erupted into tomato plants. Their stems grew, interweaving across the mouth of the tunnel. Leaves unfurled with ultra-speed. Tomatoes swelled into fist-size red fruits. The tunnel was almost closed off when a dark feathery shape burst through a gap in the net.

Talons raked my left cheek as the bird flew past, narrowly missing my eye. The creature circled the room, screeching in triumph, then settled on the spiral ramp ten feet above us, peering down with round gold eyes like searchlights.

An owl? No, it was twice as big as Athena's largest specimens. Its plumage glistened obsidian black. It lifted one leathery red claw, opened its golden beak, and, using its thick black tongue, licked the blood from its talons—*my* blood.

My sight grew fuzzy. My knees turned to rubber. I was dimly aware of other noises coming from the tunnel—frustrated shrieks, the flapping of wings as more demon birds battered against the tomato plants, trying to get through.

Meg appeared at my side, her scimitars flashing in her hands, her eyes fixed on the huge dark bird above us. "Apollo, you okay?"

"Strix," I said, the name floating up from the recesses of my feeble mortal

mind. “That thing is a strix.”

“How do we kill it?” Meg asked. Always the practical one.

I touched the cuts on my face. I could feel neither my cheek nor my fingers. “Well, killing it could be a problem.”

Grover yelped as the strixes outside screamed and threw themselves at the plants. “Guys, we’ve got six or seven more trying to get in. These tomatoes aren’t going to hold them.”

“Apollo, answer me right now,” Meg ordered. “What do I need to do?”

I wanted to comply. Really, I did. But I was having trouble forming words. I felt as if Hephaestus had just performed one of his famous tooth extractions on me and I was still under the influence of his giggle nectar.

“K-killing the bird will curse you,” I said finally.

“And if I *don’t* kill it?” Meg asked.

“Oh, then it will d-disembowel you, drink your blood, and eat your flesh.” I grinned, though I had a feeling I hadn’t said anything funny. “Also, don’t let a strix scratch you. It’ll paralyze you!”

By way of demonstration, I fell over sideways.

Above us, the strix spread its wings and swooped down.

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2

Now I'm a suitcase
Duct-taped to a satyr's back.
Worst. Morning. Ever.

"STOP!" Grover yelped. "We come in peace!"

The bird was not impressed. It attacked, only missing the satyr's face because Meg lashed out with her scimitars. The strix veered, pirouetting between her blades, and landed unscathed a little higher up the spiral ramp.

SCREE! the strix yelled, ruffling its feathers.

"What do you *mean* 'you need to kill us'?" Grover asked.

Meg scowled. "You can talk to it?"

"Well, yes," Grover said. "It's an animal."

"Why didn't you tell us what it was saying before now?" Meg asked.

"Because it was just yelling *scree*!" Grover said. "Now it's saying *scree* as in it needs to kill us."

I tried to move my legs. They seemed to have turned into sacks of cement, which I found vaguely amusing. I could still move my arms and had some feeling in my chest, but I wasn't sure how long that would last.

"Perhaps ask the strix *why* it needs to kill us?" I suggested.

"Scree!" Grover said.

I was getting tired of the strix language. The bird replied in a series of squawks and clicks.

Meanwhile, out in the corridor, the other strixes shrieked and bashed against the net of plants. Black talons and gold beaks poked out, snapping tomatoes into pico de gallo. I figured we had a few minutes at most until the birds burst through and killed us all, but their razor-sharp beaks sure were cute!

Grover wrung his hands. "The strix says he's been sent to drink our blood, eat our flesh, and disembowel us, not necessarily in that order. He says he's

sorry, but it's a direct command from the emperor."

"Stupid emperors," Meg grumbled. "Which one?"

"I don't know," Grover said. "The strix just calls him *Scree*."

"You can translate *disembowel*," she noted, "but you can't translate the emperor's name?"

Personally, I was okay with that. Since leaving Indianapolis, I'd spent a lot of time mulling over the Dark Prophecy we had received in the Cave of Trophonius. We had already encountered Nero and Commodus, and I had a dreadful suspicion about the identity of the third emperor, whom we had yet to meet. At the moment, I didn't want confirmation. The euphoria of the strix venom was starting to dissipate. I was about to be eaten alive by a bloodsucking mega-owl. I didn't need any more reasons to weep in despair.

The strix dove at Meg. She dodged aside, whacking the flat of her blade against the bird's tail feathers as it rushed past, sending the unfortunate bird into the opposite wall, where it smacked face-first into the brick, exploding in a cloud of monster dust and feathers.

"Meg!" I said. "I told you not to kill it! You'll get cursed!"

"I didn't kill it. It committed suicide against that wall."

"I don't think the Fates will see it that way."

"Then let's not tell them."

"Guys?" Grover pointed to the tomato plants, which were rapidly thinning under the onslaught of claws and beaks. "If we can't kill the strixes, maybe we should strengthen this barrier?"

He raised his pipes and played. Meg turned her swords back into rings. She stretched her hands toward the tomato plants. The stems thickened and the roots struggled to take hold in the stone floor, but it was a losing battle. Too many strixes were now battering the other side, ripping through the new growth as fast as it emerged.

"No good." Meg stumbled back, her face beaded with sweat. "Only so much we can do without soil and sunlight."

"You're right." Grover looked above us, his eyes following the spiral ramp up into the gloom. "We're nearly home. If we can just get to the top before the strixes get through—"

"So we climb," Meg announced.

"Hello?" I said miserably. "Paralyzed former god here."

Grover grimaced at Meg. "Duct tape?"

"Duct tape," she agreed.

May the gods defend me from heroes with duct tape. And heroes *always* seem to have duct tape. Meg produced a roll from a pouch on her gardening belt. She propped me into a sitting position, back-to-back with Grover, then proceeded to loop tape under our armpits, binding me to the satyr as if I were a hiking pack.

With Meg's help, Grover staggered to his feet, jostling me around so I got random views of the walls, the floor, Meg's face, and my own paralyzed legs manspreading beneath me.

"Uh, Grover?" I asked. "Will you have enough strength to carry me all the way up?"

"Satyrs are great climbers," he wheezed.

He started up the narrow ramp, my paralyzed feet dragging behind us. Meg followed, glancing back every so often at the rapidly deteriorating tomato plants.

"Apollo," she said, "tell me about strixes."

I sifted through my brain, panning for useful nuggets among the sludge.

"They…they are birds of ill omen," I said. "When they show up, bad things happen."

"Duh," said Meg. "What else?"

"Er, they usually feed on the young and weak. Babies, old people, paralyzed gods…that sort of thing. They breed in the upper reaches of Tartarus. I'm only speculating here, but I'm pretty sure they don't make good pets."

"How do we drive them off?" she said. "If we can't kill them, how do we stop them?"

"I—I don't know."

Meg sighed in frustration. "Talk to the Arrow of Dodona. See if it knows anything. I'm going to try buying us some time."

She jogged back down the ramp.

Talking to the arrow was just about the *only* way my day could get worse, but I was under orders, and when Meg commanded me, I could not disobey. I reached over my shoulder, groped through my quiver, and pulled forth the magic missile.

"Hello, Wise and Powerful Arrow," I said. (Always best to start with flattery.)

TOOKEST THEE LONG ENOUGH, intoned the arrow. *FOR FORTNIGHTS UNTOLD HAVE I TRIED TO SPEAK WITH THEE.*

"It's been about forty-eight hours," I said.

VERILY, TIME DOTH CREEP WHEN ONE IS QUIVERED. THOU SHOULDST TRY IT AND SEEST HOW THOU LIKEST IT.

"Right." I resisted the urge to snap the arrow's shaft. "What can you tell me about strixes?"

I MUST SPEAK TO THEE ABOUT—HOLD THE PHONE. STRIXES? WHEREFORE TALKEST TO ME OF THOSE?

"Because they are about to killeth—to kill us."

FIE! groaned the arrow. *THOU SHOULDST AVOID SUCH DANGERS!*

“I would never have thought of that,” I said. “Do you have any strix-pertinent information or not, O Wise Projectile?”

The arrow buzzed, no doubt trying to access Wikipedia. It denies using the Internet. Perhaps, then, it’s just a coincidence the arrow is always more helpful when we are in an area with free Wi-Fi.

Grover valiantly lugged my sorry mortal body up the ramp. He huffed and gasped, staggering dangerously close to the edge. The floor of the room was now fifty feet below us—just far enough for a nice, lethal fall. I could see Meg down there pacing, muttering to herself and shaking out more packets of gardening seeds.

Above, the ramp seemed to spiral forever. Whatever waited for us at the top, assuming there *was* a top, remained lost in the darkness. I found it very inconsiderate that the Labyrinth did not provide an elevator, or at least a proper handrail. How were heroes with accessibility needs supposed to enjoy this death trap?

At last the Arrow of Dodona delivered its verdict: *STRIXES ART DANGEROUS.*

“Once again,” I said, “your wisdom brings light to the darkness.”

SHUT THEE UP, the arrow continued. *THE BIRDS CAN BE SLAIN, THOUGH THIS SHALT CURSE THE SLAYER AND CAUSETH MORE STRIXES TO APPEARETH.*

“Yes, yes. What else?”

“What’s it saying?” Grover asked between gasps.

Among its many irritating qualities, the arrow spoke solely in my mind, so not only did I look like a crazy person when I conversed with it, but I had to constantly report its ramblings to my friends.

“It’s still searching Google,” I told Grover. “Perhaps, O Arrow, you could do a Boolean search, ‘strix plus defeat.’”

I USE NOT SUCH CHEATS! the arrow thundered. Then it was silent long enough to type *strix + defeat.*

THE BIRDS MAY BE REPELLED WITH PIG ENTRAILS, it reported. *HAST THOU ANY?*

“Grover,” I called over my shoulder, “would you happen to have any pig entrails?”

“What?” He turned, which was not an effective way of facing me, since I was duct-taped to his back. He almost scraped my nose off on the brick wall. “Why would I carry pig entrails? I’m a vegetarian!”

Meg clambered up the ramp to join us.

“The birds are almost through,” she reported. “I tried different kinds of plants. I tried to summon Peaches….” Her voice broke with despair.

Since entering the Labyrinth, she had been unable to summon her peach-

spirit minion, who was handy in a fight but rather picky about when and where he showed up. I supposed that, much like tomato plants, Peaches didn't do well underground.

"Arrow of Dodona, what else?" I shouted at its point. "There has to be *something* besides pig intestines that will keep strixes at bay!"

WAIT, the arrow said. *HARK! IT APPEARETH THAT ARBUTUS SHALL SERVE.*

"*Our-butt-us* shall what?" I demanded.

Too late.

Below us, with a peal of bloodthirsty shrieks, the strixes broke through the tomato barricade and swarmed into the room.

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3

Strixes do sucketh
Yea, verily I tell you
Much sucking is theirs

“HERE they come!” Meg yelled.

Honestly, whenever I wanted her to talk about something important, she shut up. But when we were facing an obvious danger, she wasted her breath yelling *Here they come.*

Grover increased his pace, showing heroic strength as he bounded up the ramp, hauling my flabby duct-taped carcass behind him.

Facing backward, I had a perfect view of the strixes as they swirled out of the shadows, their yellow eyes flashing like coins in a murky fountain. A dozen birds? More? Given how much trouble we’d had with a single strix, I didn’t like our chances against an entire flock, especially since we were now lined up like juicy targets on a narrow, slippery ledge. I doubted Meg could help *all* the birds commit suicide by whacking them face-first into the wall.

“Arbutus!” I yelled. “The arrow said something about arbutus repelling strixes.”

“That’s a plant.” Grover gasped for air. “I think I met an arbutus once.”

“Arrow,” I said, “what is an arbutus?”

I KNOW NOT! BECAUSE I WAS BORN IN A GROVE DOTH NOT MAKETH ME A GARDENER!

Disgusted, I shoved the arrow back into my quiver.

“Apollo, cover me.” Meg thrust one of her swords into my hand, then rifled through her gardening belt, glancing nervously at the strixes as they ascended.

How Meg expected me to cover her, I wasn’t sure. I was garbage at swordplay, even when I wasn’t duct-taped to a satyr’s back and facing targets that would curse anyone who killed them.

“Grover!” Meg yelled. “Can we figure out what type of plant an arbutus is?”

She ripped open a random packet and tossed seeds into the void. They burst like heated popcorn kernels and formed grenade-size yams with leafy green stems. They fell among the flock of strixes, hitting a few and causing startled squawking, but the birds kept coming.

“Those are tubers,” Grover wheezed. “I think an arbutus is a fruit plant.”

Meg ripped open a second seed packet. She showered the strixes with an explosion of bushes dotted with green fruits. The birds simply veered around them.

“Grapes?” Grover asked.

“Gooseberries,” said Meg.

“Are you sure?” Grover asked. “The shape of the leaves—”

“Grover!” I snapped. “Let’s restrict ourselves to military botany. What’s a —? DUCK!”

Now, gentle reader, you be the judge. Was I asking the question *What’s a duck?* Of course I wasn’t. Despite Meg’s later complaints, I was trying to warn her that the nearest strix was charging straight at her face.

She didn’t understand my warning, which was *not my fault*.

I swung my borrowed scimitar, attempting to protect my young friend. Only my terrible aim and Meg’s quick reflexes prevented me from decapitating her.

“Stop that!” she yelled, swatting the strix aside with her other blade.

“You said *cover me*!” I protested.

“I didn’t mean—” She cried out in pain, stumbling as a bloody cut opened along her right thigh.

Then we were engulfed in an angry storm of talons, beaks, and black wings. Meg swung her scimitar wildly. A strix launched itself at my face, its claws about to rip my eyes out, when Grover did the unexpected: he screamed.

Why is that surprising? you may be asking. *When you’re swarmed by entrail-devouring birds, it is a perfect time to scream.*

True. But the sound that came from the satyr’s mouth was no ordinary cry.

It reverberated through the chamber like the shock wave of a bomb, scattering the birds, shaking the stones, and filling me with cold, unreasoning fear.

Had I not been duct-taped to the satyr’s back, I would have fled. I would have jumped off the ledge just to get away from that sound. As it was, I dropped Meg’s sword and clamped my hands over my ears. Meg, lying prone on the ramp, bleeding and no doubt already partially paralyzed by the strix’s poison, curled into a ball and buried her head in her arms.

The strixes fled back down into the darkness.

My heart pounded. Adrenaline surged through me. I needed several deep breaths before I could speak.

"Grover," I said, "did you just summon Panic?"

I couldn't see his face, but I could feel him shaking. He lay down on the ramp, rolling to one side so I faced the wall.

"I didn't mean to." Grover's voice was hoarse. "Haven't done that in years."

"P-panic?" Meg asked.

"The cry of the lost god Pan," I said. Even saying his name filled me with sadness. Ah, what good times the nature god and I had had in ancient days, dancing and cavorting in the wilderness! Pan had been a first-class cavorter. Then humans destroyed most of the wilderness, and Pan faded into nothing. You humans. You're why we gods can't have nice things.

"I've never heard anyone but Pan use that power," I said. "How?"

Grover made a sound that was half sob, half sigh. "Long story."

Meg grunted. "Got rid of the birds, anyway." I heard her ripping fabric, probably making a bandage for her leg.

"Are you paralyzed?" I asked.

"Yeah," she muttered. "Waist down."

Grover shifted in our duct-tape harness. "I'm still okay, but exhausted. The birds will be back, and there's no way I can carry you up the ramp now."

I did not doubt him. The shout of Pan would scare away almost anything, but it was a taxing bit of magic. Every time Pan used it, he would take a three-day nap afterward.

Below us, the strixes' cries echoed through the Labyrinth. Their screeching already sounded like it was turning from fear—*Fly away!*—to confusion: *Why are we flying away?*

I tried to wriggle my feet. To my surprise, I could now feel my toes inside my socks.

"Can someone cut me loose?" I asked. "I think the poison is losing strength."

From her horizontal position, Meg used a scimitar to saw me out of the duct tape. The three of us lined up with our backs literally to the wall—three sweaty, sad, pathetic pieces of strix bait waiting to die. Below us, the squawking of the doom birds got louder. Soon they'd be back, angrier than ever. About fifty feet above us, just visible now in the dim glint of Meg's swords, our ramp dead-ended at a domed brick ceiling.

"So much for an exit," Grover said. "I thought for sure…This shaft looks so much like…" He shook his head, as if he couldn't bear to tell us what he'd hoped.

"I'm not dying here," Meg grumbled.

Her appearance said otherwise. She had bloody knuckles and skinned knees. Her green dress, a prized gift from Percy Jackson's mother, looked like it had been used as a saber-toothed tiger's scratching post. She had ripped off her left legging and used it to stanch the bleeding cut on her thigh, but the fabric was already soaked through.

Nevertheless, her eyes shone defiantly. The rhinestones still glittered on the tips of her cat-eye glasses. I'd learned never to count out Meg McCaffrey while her rhinestones still glittered.

She rummaged through her seed packages, squinting at the labels. "Roses. Daffodils. Squash. Carrots."

"No…" Grover bumped his fist against his forehead. "Arbutus is like…a flowering tree. Argh, I should *know* this."

I sympathized with his memory problems. I should have known *many* things: the weaknesses of strixes, the nearest secret exit from the Labyrinth, Zeus's private number so I could call him and plead for my life. But my mind was blank. My legs had begun to tremble—perhaps a sign I would soon be able to walk again—but this didn't cheer me up. I had nowhere to go, except to choose whether I wanted to die at the top of this chamber or the bottom.

Meg kept shuffling seed packets. "Rutabaga, wisteria, pyracantha, strawberries—"

"Strawberries!" Grover yelped so loudly I thought he was trying for another blast of Panic. "That's it! The arbutus is a strawberry tree!"

Meg frowned. "Strawberries don't *grow* on trees. They're genus *Fragaria*, part of the rose family."

"Yes, yes, I know!" Grover rolled his hands like he couldn't get the words out fast enough. "And Arbutus is in the heath family, but—"

"What are you two talking about?" I demanded. I wondered if they were sharing the Arrow of Dodona's Wi-Fi connection to look up information on botany.com. "We're about to die, and you're arguing about plant genera?"

"*Fragaria* might be close enough!" Grover insisted. "Arbutus fruit *looks* like strawberries. That's why it's called a strawberry tree. I met an arbutus dryad once. We got in this big argument about it. Besides, I specialize in strawberry-growing. All the satyrs from Camp Half-Blood do!"

Meg stared doubtfully at her packet of strawberry seeds. "I dunno."

Below us, a dozen strixes burst forth from the mouth of the tunnel, shrieking in a chorus of pre-disembowelment fury.

"TRY THE FRAGGLE ROCK!" I yelled.

"Fragaria," Meg corrected.

"WHATEVER!"

Rather than throwing her strawberry seeds into the void, Meg ripped open the packet and shook them out along the edge of the ramp with maddening

slowness.

"Hurry." I fumbled for my bow. "We've got maybe thirty seconds."

"Hold on." Meg tapped out the last of the seeds.

"Fifteen seconds!"

"Wait." Meg tossed aside the packet. She placed her hands over the seeds like she was about to play the keyboard (which, by the way, she can't do well, despite my efforts to teach her).

"Okay," she said. "Go."

Grover raised his pipes and began a frantic version of "Strawberry Fields Forever" in triple time. I forgot about my bow and grabbed my ukulele, joining him in the song. I didn't know if it would help, but if I was going to get ripped apart, at least I wanted to go out playing the Beatles.

Just as the wave of strixes was about to hit, the seeds exploded like a battery of fireworks. Green streamers arced across the void, anchoring against the far wall and forming a row of vines that reminded me of the strings of a giant lute. The strixes could have easily flown through the gaps, but instead they went crazy, veering to avoid the plants and colliding with each other in midair.

Meanwhile, the vines thickened, leaves unfurled, white flowers bloomed, and strawberries ripened, filling the air with their sweet fragrance.

The chamber rumbled. Wherever the strawberry plants touched the stone, the brick cracked and dissolved, giving the strawberries an easier place to root.

Meg lifted her hands from her imaginary keyboard. "Is the Labyrinth…*helping*?"

"I don't know!" I said, strumming furiously on an F minor 7. "But don't stop!"

With impossible speed, the strawberries spread across the walls in a tide of green.

I was just thinking *Wow, imagine what the plants could do with sunlight!* when the domed ceiling cracked like an eggshell. Brilliant rays stabbed through the darkness. Chunks of rock rained down, smashing into the birds, punching through strawberry vines (which, unlike the strixes, grew back almost immediately).

As soon as the sunlight hit the birds, they screamed and dissolved into dust.

Grover lowered his panpipe. I set down my ukulele. We watched in amazement as the plants continued to grow, interlacing until a strawberry-runner trampoline stretched across the entire area of the room at our feet.

The ceiling had disintegrated, revealing a brilliant blue sky. Hot dry air wafted down like the breath from an open oven.

Grover raised his face to the light. He sniffled, tears glistening on his

cheeks.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

He stared at me. The heartbreak on his face was more painful to look at than the sunlight.

"The smell of warm strawberries," he said. "Like Camp Half-Blood. It's been so long…."

I felt an unfamiliar twinge in my chest. I patted Grover's knee. I had not spent much time at Camp Half-Blood, the training ground for Greek demigods on Long Island, but I understood how he felt. I wondered how my children were doing there: Kayla, Will, Austin. I remembered sitting with them at the campfire, singing "My Mother Was a Minotaur" as we ate burnt marshmallows off a stick. Such perfect camaraderie is rare, even in an immortal life.

Meg leaned against the wall. Her complexion was pasty, her breathing ragged.

I dug through my pockets and found a broken square of ambrosia in a napkin. I did not keep the stuff for myself. In my mortal state, eating the food of the gods might cause me to spontaneously combust. But Meg, I had found, was not always good about taking her ambrosia.

"Eat." I pressed the napkin into her hand. "It'll help the paralysis pass more quickly."

She clenched her jaw, as if about to yell *I DON'T WANNA!*, then apparently decided she liked the idea of having working legs again. She began nibbling on the ambrosia.

"What's up there?" she asked, frowning at the blue sky.

Grover brushed the tears from his face. "We've made it. The Labyrinth brought us right to our base."

"Our base?" I was delighted to learn we *had* a base. I hoped that meant security, a soft bed, and perhaps an espresso machine.

"Yeah." Grover swallowed nervously. "Assuming anything is left of it. Let's find out."

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4

Welcome to my base
We have rocks, sand, and ruins
Did I mention rocks?

THEY tell me I reached the surface.

I don't remember.

Meg was partially paralyzed, and Grover had already carried me halfway up the ramp, so it seems wrong that I was the one who passed out, but what can I say? That Fm7 chord on "Strawberry Fields Forever" must have taken more out of me than I realized.

I *do* remember feverish dreams.

Before me rose a graceful olive-skinned woman, her long auburn hair gathered up in a donut braid, her sleeveless dress as light and gray as moth wings. She looked about twenty, but her eyes were black pearls—their hard luster formed over centuries, a defensive shell hiding untold sorrow and disappointment. They were the eyes of an immortal who had seen great civilizations fall.

We stood together on a stone platform, at the edge of what looked like an indoor swimming pool filled with lava. The air shimmered with heat. Ashes stung my eyes.

The woman raised her arms in a supplicating gesture. Glowing red iron cuffs shackled her wrists. Molten chains anchored her to the platform, though the hot metal did not seem to burn her.

"I am sorry," she said.

Somehow, I knew she wasn't speaking to me. I was only observing this scene through the eyes of someone else. She'd just delivered bad news to this other person, *crushing* news, though I had no idea what it was.

"I would spare you if I could," she continued. "I would spare *her.* But I cannot. Tell Apollo he must come. Only he can release me, though it is a…"

She choked as if a shard of glass had wedged in her throat. “Four letters,” she croaked. “Starts with *T*.”

Trap, I thought. *The answer is* trap*!*

I felt briefly thrilled, the way you do when you’re watching a game show and you know the answer. *If only I were the contestant,* you think, *I’d win all the prizes!*

Then I realized I didn’t like this game show. Especially if the answer was *trap*. Especially if that trap was the grand prize waiting for me.

The woman’s image dissolved into flames.

I found myself in a different place—a covered terrace overlooking a moonlit bay. In the distance, shrouded in mist, rose the familiar dark profile of Mount Vesuvius, but Vesuvius as it had been before the eruption of 79 CE blew its summit to pieces, destroying Pompeii and wiping out thousands of Romans. (You can blame Vulcan for that. He was having a *bad* week.)

The evening sky was bruised purple, the coastline lit only by firelight, the moon, and the stars. Under my feet, the terrace’s mosaic floor glittered with gold and silver tiles, the sort of artwork very few Romans could afford. On the walls, multicolored frescoes were framed in silk draperies that had to have cost hundreds of thousands of denarii. I knew where I must be: an imperial villa, one of the many pleasure palaces that lined the Gulf of Naples in the early days of the empire. Normally such a place would have blazed with light throughout the night, as a show of power and opulence, but the torches on this terrace were dark, wrapped in black cloth.

In the shadow of a column, a slender young man stood facing the sea. His expression was obscured, but his posture spoke of impatience. He tugged on his white robes, crossed his arms over his chest, and tapped his sandaled foot against the floor.

A second man appeared, marching onto the terrace with the clink of armor and the labored breathing of a heavyset fighter. A praetorian guard’s helmet hid his face.

He knelt before the younger man. “It is done, Princeps.”

Princeps. Latin for *first in line* or *first citizen*—that lovely euphemism the Roman emperors used to downplay just how absolute their power was.

“Are you sure this time?” asked a young, reedy voice. “I don’t want any more surprises.”

The praetor grunted. “Very sure, Princeps.”

The guard held out his massive hairy forearms. Bloody scratches glistened in the moonlight, as if desperate fingernails had raked his flesh.

“What did you use?” The younger man sounded fascinated.

“His own pillow,” the big man said. “Seemed easiest.”

The younger man laughed. “The old pig deserved it. I wait *years* for him

to die, finally we announce he's kicked the *situla*, and he has the nerve to wake up again? I don't think so. Tomorrow will be a new, better day for Rome."

He stepped into the moonlight, revealing his face—a face I had hoped never to see again.

He was handsome in a thin, angular way, though his ears stuck out a bit too much. His smile was twisted. His eyes had all the warmth of a barracuda's.

Even if you do not recognize his features, dear reader, I am sure you have met him. He is the school bully too charming to get caught; the one who thinks up the cruelest pranks, has others carry out his dirty work, and still maintains a perfect reputation with the teachers. He is the boy who pulls the legs off insects and tortures stray animals, yet laughs with such pure delight he can almost convince you it is harmless fun. He's the boy who steals money from the temple collection plates, behind the backs of old ladies who praise him for being *such a nice young man*.

He is that person, that type of evil.

And tonight, he had a new name, which would *not* foretell a better day for Rome.

The praetorian guard lowered his head. "Hail, Caesar!"

I awoke from my dream shivering.

"Good timing," Grover said.

I sat up. My head throbbed. My mouth tasted like strix dust.

I was lying under a makeshift lean-to—a blue plastic tarp set on a hillside overlooking the desert. The sun was going down. Next to me, Meg was curled up asleep, her hand resting on my wrist. I suppose that was sweet, except I knew where her fingers had been. (Hint: In her nostrils.)

On a nearby slab of rock, Grover sat sipping water from his canteen. Judging from his weary expression, I guessed he had been keeping watch over us while we slept.

"I passed out?" I gathered.

He tossed me the canteen. "I thought *I* slept hard. You've been out for hours."

I took a drink, then rubbed the gunk from my eyes, wishing I could wipe the dreams from my head as easily: a woman chained in a fiery room, a trap for Apollo, a new Caesar with the pleasant smile of a fine young sociopath.

Don't think about it, I told myself. *Dreams aren't necessarily true.*

No, I answered myself. *Only the bad ones. Like those.*

I focused on Meg, snoring in the shade of our tarp. Her leg was freshly bandaged. She wore a clean T-shirt over her tattered dress. I tried to extricate

my wrist from her grip, but she held on tighter.

"She's all right," Grover assured me. "At least physically. Fell asleep after we got you situated." He frowned. "She didn't seem happy about being here, though. Said she couldn't handle this place. Wanted to leave. I was afraid she'd jump back into the Labyrinth, but I convinced her she needed to rest first. I played some music to relax her."

I scanned our surroundings, wondering what had upset Meg so badly.

Below us stretched a landscape only slightly more hospitable than Mars. (I mean the planet, not the god, though I suppose neither is much of a host.) Sun-blasted ocher mountains ringed a valley patchworked with unnaturally green golf courses, dusty barren flats, and sprawling neighborhoods of white stucco walls, red-tiled roofs, and blue swimming pools. Lining the streets, rows of listless palm trees stuck up like raggedy seams. Asphalt parking lots shimmered in the heat. A brown haze hung in the air, filling the valley like watery gravy.

"Palm Springs," I said.

I'd known the city well in the 1950s. I was pretty sure I'd hosted a party with Frank Sinatra just down the road there, by that golf course—but it felt like another life. Probably because it had been.

Now the area seemed much less welcoming—the temperature too scorching for an early spring evening, the air too heavy and acrid. Something was wrong, something I couldn't quite place.

I scanned our immediate surroundings. We were camped at the crest of a hill, the San Jacinto wilderness at our backs to the west, the sprawl of Palm Springs at our feet to the east. A gravel road skirted the base of the hill, winding toward the nearest neighborhood about half a mile below, but I could tell that our hilltop had once boasted a large structure.

Sunk in the rocky slope were a half dozen hollow brickwork cylinders, each perhaps thirty feet in diameter, like the shells of ruined sugar mills. The structures were of varying heights, in varying stages of disintegration, but their tops were all level with one another, so I guessed they must have been massive support columns for a stilt house. Judging from the detritus that littered the hillside—shards of glass, charred planks, blackened clumps of brick—I guessed that the house must have burned down many years before.

Then I realized: we must have *climbed out* of one of those cylinders to escape the Labyrinth.

I turned to Grover. "The strixes?"

He shook his head. "If any survived, they wouldn't risk the daylight, even if they could get through the strawberries. The plants have filled the entire shaft." He pointed to the farthest ring of brickwork, where we must have emerged. "Nobody's getting in or out that way anymore."

"But…" I gestured at the ruins. "Surely this isn't your *base*?"

I was hoping he would correct me. *Oh, no, our base is that nice house down there with the Olympic-size swimming pool, right next to the fifteenth hole!*

Instead, he had the nerve to look pleased. “Yeah. This place has powerful natural energy. It’s a perfect sanctuary. Can’t you feel the life force?”

I picked up a charred brick. “Life force?”

“You’ll see.” Grover took off his cap and scratched between his horns. “The way things have been, all the dryads have to stay dormant until sunset. It’s the only way they can survive. But they’ll be waking up soon.”

The way things have been.

I glanced west. The sun had just dropped behind the mountains. The sky was marbled with heavy layers of red and black, more appropriate for Mordor than Southern California.

“What’s going on?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

Grover gazed sadly into the distance. “You haven’t seen the news? Biggest forest fires in state history. On top of the drought, the heat waves, and the earthquakes.” He shuddered. “Thousands of dryads have died. Thousands more have gone into hibernation. If these were just *normal* natural disasters, that would be bad enough, but—”

Meg yelped in her sleep. She sat up abruptly, blinking in confusion. From the panic in her eyes, I guessed her dreams had been even worse than mine.

“W-we’re really here?” she asked. “I didn’t dream it?”

“It’s all right,” I said. “You’re safe.”

She shook her head, her lips quivering. “No. No, I’m not.”

With fumbling fingers, she removed her glasses, as if she might be able to handle her surroundings better if they were fuzzier. “I can’t be here. Not again.”

“Again?” I asked.

A line from the Indiana prophecy tugged at my memory: *Demeter’s daughter finds her ancient roots.* “You mean you *lived* here?”

Meg scanned the ruins. She shrugged miserably, though whether that meant *I don’t know* or *I don’t want to talk about it,* I couldn’t tell.

The desert seemed an unlikely home for Meg—a street kid from Manhattan, raised in Nero’s royal household.

Grover tugged thoughtfully at his goatee. “A child of Demeter…That actually makes a lot of sense.”

I stared at him. “In this place? A child of Vulcan, perhaps. Or Feronia, the wilderness goddess. Or even Mefitis, the goddess of poisonous gas. But Demeter? What is a child of Demeter supposed to grow here? Rocks?”

Grover looked hurt. “You don’t understand. Once you meet everybody—”

Meg crawled out from beneath the tarp. She got unsteadily to her feet. “I

have to leave.”

“Hold on!” Grover pleaded. “We need your help. At least talk to the others!”

Meg hesitated. “Others?”

Grover gestured north. I couldn’t see what he was pointing to until I stood up. Then I noticed, half-hidden behind the brick ruins, a row of six boxy white structures like…storage sheds? No. Greenhouses. The one nearest the ruins had melted and collapsed long ago, no doubt a victim of the fire. The second hut’s corrugated polycarbonate walls and roof had fallen apart like a house of cards. But the other four looked intact. Clay flowerpots were stacked outside. The doors stood open. Inside, green plant matter pressed against the translucent walls—palm fronds like giant hands pushing to get out.

I didn’t see how anything could live in this scalded barren wasteland, especially inside a greenhouse meant to keep the climate even warmer. I definitely didn’t want to get any closer to those claustrophobic hot boxes.

Grover smiled encouragingly. “I’m sure everyone’s awake by now. Come on, I’ll introduce you to the gang!”

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5

First-aid succulent,
Heal me of my many cuts!
(But no slime trail, please)

GROVER led us to the first intact greenhouse, which exuded a smell like the breath of Persephone.

That's not a compliment. Miss Springtime used to sit next to me at family dinners, and she was not shy about sharing her halitosis. Imagine the odor of a bin full of wet mulch and earthworm poop. Yes, I just love spring.

Inside the greenhouse, the plants had taken over. I found that frightening, since most of them were cacti. By the doorway squatted a pineapple cactus the size of a cracker barrel, its yellow spines like shish-kebab skewers. In the back corner stood a majestic Joshua tree, its shaggy branches holding up the roof. Against the opposite wall bloomed a massive prickly pear, dozens of bristly paddles topped with purple fruit that looked delicious, except for the fact that each one had more spikes than Ares's favorite mace. Metal tables groaned under the weight of other succulents—pickleweed, spinystar, cholla, and dozens more I couldn't name. Surrounded by so many thorns and flowers, in such oppressive heat, I had a flashback to Iggy Pop's 2003 Coachella set.

"I'm back!" Grover announced. "And I brought friends!"

Silence.

Even at sunset, the temperature inside was so high, and the air so thick, I imagined I would die of heatstroke in approximately four minutes. And I was a former sun god.

At last the first dryad appeared. A chlorophyll bubble ballooned from the side of the prickly pear and burst into green mist. The droplets coalesced into a small girl with emerald skin, spiky yellow hair, and a fringe dress made entirely of cactus bristles. Her glare was almost as pointed as her dress. Fortunately, it was directed at Grover, not me.

“Where have you *been*?” she demanded.

“Ah.” Grover cleared his throat. “I got called away. Magical summons. I’ll tell you all about it later. But look, I brought Apollo! And Meg, daughter of Demeter!”

He showed off Meg like she was a fabulous prize on *The Price Is Right.*

“Hmph,” said the dryad. “I suppose daughters of Demeter are okay. I’m Prickly Pear. Or Pear for short.”

“Hi,” Meg said weakly.

The dryad narrowed her eyes at me. Given her spiny dress, I hoped she wasn’t a hugger. “You’re Apollo as in *the god Apollo*?” she asked. “I don’t believe it.”

“Some days, neither do I,” I admitted.

Grover scanned the room. “Where are the others?”

Right on cue, another chlorophyll bubble popped over one of the succulents. A second dryad appeared—a large young woman in a muumuu like the husk of an artichoke. Her hair was a forest of dark green triangles. Her face and arms glistened as if they’d just been oiled. (At least I hoped it was oil and not sweat.)

“Oh!” she cried, seeing our battered appearances. “Are you hurt?”

Pear rolled her eyes. “Al, knock it off.”

“But they look hurt!” Al shuffled forward. She took my hand. Her touch was cold and greasy. “Let me take care of these cuts, at least. Grover, why didn’t you *heal* these poor people?”

“I tried!” the satyr protested. “They just took a lot of damage!”

That could be my life motto, I thought: *He takes a lot of damage.*

Al ran her fingertips over my cuts, leaving trails of goo like slug tracks. It was not a pleasant sensation, but it did ease the pain.

“You’re Aloe Vera,” I realized. “I used to make healing ointments out of you.”

She beamed. “He remembers me! Apollo remembers me!”

In the back of the room, a third dryad emerged from the trunk of the Joshua tree—a *male* dryad, which was quite rare. His skin was as brown as his tree’s bark, his olive hair long and wild, his clothes weathered khaki. He might have been an explorer just returning from the outback.

“I’m Joshua,” he said. “Welcome to Aeithales.”

And at that moment, Meg McCaffrey decided to faint.

I could have told her that swooning in front of an attractive boy was *never* cool. The strategy hadn’t worked for me *once* in thousands of years. Nevertheless, being a good friend, I caught her before she could nose-dive into the gravel.

“Oh, poor girl!” Aloe Vera gave Grover another critical look. “She’s

exhausted and overheated. Haven't you let her rest?"

"She's been asleep all afternoon!"

"Well, she's dehydrated." Aloe put her hand on Meg's forehead. "She needs water."

Pear sniffed. "Don't we all."

"Take her to the Cistern," Al said. "Mellie should be awake by now. I'll be along in a minute."

Grover perked up. "Mellie's here? They made it?"

"They arrived this morning," said Joshua.

"What about the search parties?" Grover pressed. "Any word?"

The dryads exchanged troubled glances.

"The news isn't good," Joshua said. "Only one group has come back so far, and—"

"Excuse me," I pleaded. "I have no idea what any of you are talking about, but Meg is heavy. Where should I put her?"

Grover stirred. "Right. Sorry, I'll show you." He draped Meg's left arm over his shoulders, taking half her weight. Then he faced the dryads. "Guys, how about we all meet at the Cistern for dinner? We've got a lot to talk about."

Joshua nodded. "I'll alert the other greenhouses. And, Grover, you promised us enchiladas. Three days ago."

"I know." Grover sighed. "I'll get more."

Together, the two of us lugged Meg out of the greenhouse.

As we dragged her across the hillside, I asked Grover my most burning question: "Dryads eat enchiladas?"

He looked offended. "Of course! You expect them just to eat fertilizer?"

"Well…yes."

"Stereotyping," he muttered.

I decided that was my cue to change the subject.

"Did I imagine it," I asked, "or did Meg faint because she heard the name of this place? *Aeithales*. That's ancient Greek for *evergreen*, if I recall correctly."

It seemed an odd name for a place in the desert. Then again, no odder than dryads eating enchiladas.

"We found the name carved into the old doorsill," Grover said. "There's a lot we don't know about the ruins, but like I said, this site has a lot of nature energy. Whoever lived here and started the greenhouses…they knew what they were doing."

I wished I could say the same. "Weren't the dryads *born* in those greenhouses? Don't they know who planted them?"

"Most were too young when the house burned down," Grover said. "Some of the older plants might know more, but they've gone dormant. Or"—he

nodded toward the destroyed greenhouses—"they're no longer with us."

We observed a moment of silence for the departed succulents.

Grover steered us toward the largest of the brick cylinders. Judging from its size and position in the center of the ruins, I guessed it must have once been the central support column for the structure. At ground level, rectangular openings ringed the circumference like medieval castle windows. We dragged Meg through one of these and found ourselves in a space very much like the well where we'd fought the strixes.

The top was open to the sky. A spiral ramp led downward, but fortunately only twenty feet before reaching the bottom. In the center of the dirt floor, like the hole in a giant donut, glittered a dark blue pool, cooling the air and making the space feel comfortable and welcoming. Around the pool lay a ring of sleeping bags. Blooming cacti overflowed from alcoves built into the walls.

The Cistern was not a fancy structure—nothing like the dining pavilion at Camp Half-Blood, or the Waystation in Indiana—but inside it I immediately felt better, safer. I understood what Grover had been talking about. This place resonated with soothing energy.

We got Meg to the bottom of the ramp without tripping and falling, which I considered a major accomplishment. We set her down on one of the sleeping bags, then Grover scanned the room.

"Mellie?" he called. "Gleeson? Are you guys here?"

The name Gleeson sounded vaguely familiar to me, but, as usual, I couldn't place it.

No chlorophyll bubbles popped from the plants. Meg turned on her side and muttered in her sleep…something about Peaches. Then, at the edge of the pond, wisps of white fog began to gather. They fused into the shape of a petite woman in a silvery dress. Her dark hair floated around her as if she were underwater, revealing her slightly pointed ears. In a sling over one shoulder she held a sleeping baby perhaps seven months old, with hooved feet and tiny goat horns on his head. His fat cheek was squished against his mother's clavicle. His mouth was a veritable cornucopia of drool.

The cloud nymph (for surely that's what she was) smiled at Grover. Her brown eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. She held one finger to her lips, indicating that she'd rather not wake the baby. I couldn't blame her. Satyr babies at that age are loud and rambunctious, and can teethe their way through several metal cans a day.

Grover whispered, "Mellie, you made it!"

"Grover, dear." She looked down at the sleeping form of Meg, then tilted her head at me. "Are you…Are you him?"

"If you mean Apollo," I said, "I'm afraid so."

Mellie pursed her lips. "I'd heard rumors, but I didn't believe them. You poor thing. How are you holding up?"

In times past, I would have scoffed at any nymph who dared to call me *poor thing*. Of course, few nymphs would have shown me such consideration. Usually they were too busy running away from me. Now, Mellie's show of concern caused a lump to form in my throat. I was tempted to rest my head on her other shoulder and sob out my troubles.

"I—I'm fine," I managed. "Thank you."

"And your sleeping friend here?" she asked.

"Just exhausted, I think." Though I wondered if that was the whole story with Meg. "Aloe Vera said she would be along in a few minutes to care for her."

Mellie looked worried. "All right. I'll make sure Aloe doesn't overdo it."

"Overdo it?"

Grover coughed. "Where's Gleeson?"

Mellie scanned the room, as if just realizing this Gleeson person was not present. "I don't know. As soon as we got here, I went dormant for the day. He said he was going into town to pick up some camping supplies. What time is it?"

"After sunset," Grover said.

"He should've been back by now." Mellie's form shimmered with agitation, becoming so hazy I was afraid the baby might fall right through her body.

"Gleeson is your husband?" I guessed. "A satyr?"

"Yes, Gleeson Hedge," Mellie said.

I remembered him then, vaguely—the satyr who had sailed with the demigod heroes of the *Argo II*. "Do you know where he went?"

"We passed an army-surplus store as we drove in, down the hill. He loves army-surplus stores." Mellie turned to Grover. "He may have just gotten distracted, but…I don't suppose you could go check on him?"

At that moment, I realized just how exhausted Grover Underwood must be. His eyes were even redder than Mellie's. His shoulders drooped. His reed pipes dangled listlessly from his neck. Unlike Meg and me, he hadn't slept since last night in the Labyrinth. He'd used the cry of Pan, gotten us to safety, then spent all day guarding us, waiting for the dryads to wake up. Now he was being asked to make another excursion to check on Gleeson Hedge.

Still, he mustered a smile. "Sure thing, Mellie."

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "You're the best lord of the Wild ever!"

Grover blushed. "Watch Meg McCaffrey until we get back, would you? Come on, Apollo. Let's go shopping."

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6

Random plumes of fire
Ground squirrels nibble my nerves
I love the desert

EVEN after four thousand years, I could still learn important life lessons. For instance: Never go shopping with a satyr.

Finding the store took forever, because Grover kept getting sidetracked. He stopped to chat with a yucca. He gave directions to a family of ground squirrels. He smelled smoke and led us on a chase across the desert until he found a burning cigarette someone had dropped onto the road.

"This is how fires start," he said, then responsibly disposed of the cigarette butt by eating it.

I didn't see anything within a mile radius that could have caught fire. I was reasonably sure rocks and dirt were not flammable, but I never argue with people who eat cigarettes. We continued our search for the army-surplus store.

Night fell. The western horizon glowed—not with the usual orange of mortal light pollution, but with the ominous red of a distant inferno. Smoke blotted out the stars. The temperature barely cooled. The air still smelled bitter and *wrong*.

I remembered the wave of flames that had nearly incinerated us in the Labyrinth. The heat seemed to have had a personality—a resentful malevolence. I could imagine such waves coursing beneath the surface of the desert, washing through the Labyrinth, turning the mortal terrain above into an even more uninhabitable wasteland.

I thought about my dream of the woman in molten chains, standing on a platform above a pool of lava. Despite my fuzzy memories, I was sure that woman was the Erythraean Sibyl, the next Oracle we had to free from the emperors. Something told me she was imprisoned in the very center of… whatever was generating those subterranean fires. I did not relish the idea of

finding her.

"Grover," I said, "in the greenhouse, you mentioned something about search parties?"

He glanced over, swallowing painfully, as if the cigarette butt were still stuck in his throat. "The heartiest satyrs and dryads—they've been fanning out across the area for months." He fixed his eyes on the road. "We don't have many searchers. With the fires and the heat, the cacti are the only nature spirits that can still manifest. So far, only a few have come back alive. The rest…we don't know."

"What are they are searching for?" I asked. "The source of the fires? The emperor? The Oracle?"

Grover's hoof-fitted shoes slipped and skidded on the gravel shoulder. "Everything is connected. It has to be. I didn't know about the Oracle until you told me, but if the emperor is guarding it, the maze is where he would put it. And the maze is the source of our fire problems."

"When you say *maze*," I said, "you mean the Labyrinth?"

"Sort of." Grover's lower lip trembled. "The network of tunnels under Southern California—we assume it's part of the larger Labyrinth, but something's been happening to it. It's like this section of the Labyrinth has been…infected. Like it has a fever. Fires have been gathering, strengthening. Sometimes, they mass and spew—There!"

He pointed south. A quarter mile up the nearest hill, a plume of yellow flame vented skyward like the fiery tip of a welding torch. Then it was gone, leaving a patch of molten rock. I considered what would've happened if I'd been standing there when the vent flared.

"That's not normal," I said.

My ankles felt wobbly, as if I were the one with fake feet.

Grover nodded. "We already had enough problems in California: drought, climate change, pollution, all the usual stuff. But those flames…" His expression hardened. "It's some kind of magic we don't understand. Almost a full year I've been out here, trying to find the source of the heat and shut it off. I've lost so many friends."

His voice was brittle. I understood about losing friends. Over the centuries, I'd lost many mortals who were dear to me, but at that moment, one in particular came to mind: Heloise the griffin, who had died at the Waystation, defending her nest, defending us all from the attack of Emperor Commodus. I remembered her frail body, her feathers disintegrating into a bed of catnip in Emmie's roof garden….

Grover knelt and cupped his hand around a clump of weeds. The leaves crumbled.

"Too late," he muttered. "When I was a seeker, looking for Pan, at least I had hope. I thought I could find Pan and he'd save us all. Now…the god of

the Wild is dead."

I scanned the glittering lights of Palm Springs, trying to imagine Pan in such a place. Humans had done quite a number on the natural world. No wonder Pan had faded and passed on. What remained of his spirit he'd left to his followers—the satyrs and dryads—entrusting them with his mission to protect the wild.

I could have told Pan that was a terrible idea. I once went on vacation and entrusted the realm of music to my follower Nelson Riddle. I came back a few decades later and found pop music infected with sappy violins and backup singers, and Lawrence Welk was playing accordion on prime-time television. *Never. Again.*

"Pan would be proud of your efforts," I told Grover.

Even to me that sounded halfhearted.

Grover rose. "My father and my uncle sacrificed their lives searching for Pan. I just wish we had more help carrying on his work. Humans don't seem to care. Even demigods. Even…"

He stopped himself, but I suspected he was about to say *Even gods.*

I had to admit he had a point.

Gods wouldn't normally mourn the loss of a griffin, or a few dryads, or a single ecosystem. *Eh*, we would think. *Doesn't concern me!*

The longer I was mortal, the more affected I was by even the smallest loss.

I hated being mortal.

We followed the road as it skirted the walls of a gated community, leading us toward the neon store signs in the distance. I watched where I put my feet, wondering with each step if a plume of fire might turn me into a Lester flambé.

"You said everything is connected," I recalled. "You think the third emperor created this burning maze?"

Grover glanced from side to side, as if the third emperor might jump out from behind a palm tree with an ax and a scary mask. Given my suspicions about the emperor's identity, that might not be too far-fetched.

"Yes," he said, "but we don't know how or why. We don't even know where the emperor's base is. As far as we can tell, he moves around constantly."

"And…" I swallowed, afraid to ask. "The emperor's identity?"

"All we know is that he uses the monogram *NH*," said Grover. "For Neos Helios."

A phantom ground squirrel gnawed its way up my spine. "Greek. Meaning *New Sun*."

"Right," Grover said. "Not a Roman emperor's name."

No, I thought. But it was one of his favorite titles.

I decided not to share that information; not here in the dark, with only a jumpy satyr for company. If I confessed what I now knew, Grover and I might break down and sob in each other's arms, which would be both embarrassing and unhelpful.

We passed the gates of the neighborhood: DESERT PALMS. (Had someone really gotten *paid* to think up that name?) We continued to the nearest commercial street, where fast-food joints and gas stations shimmered.

"I hoped Mellie and Gleeson would have new information," Grover said. "They've been staying in LA with some demigods. I thought maybe they'd had more luck tracking down the emperor, or finding the heart of the maze."

"Is that why the Hedge family came to Palm Springs?" I asked. "To share information?"

"Partly." Grover's tone hinted at a darker, sadder reason behind Mellie and Gleeson's arrival, but I didn't press.

We stopped at a major intersection. Across the boulevard stood a warehouse store with a glowing red sign: MARCO'S MILITARY MADNESS! The parking lot was empty except for an old yellow Pinto parked near the entrance.

I read the store sign again. On second look, I realized the name was not MARCO. It was *MACRO*. Perhaps I'd developed a bit of demigod dyslexia simply from hanging around them too long.

Military Madness sounded like exactly the sort of place I didn't want to go. And Macro, as in *large worldview* or *computer program* or…something else. Why did that name unleash another herd of ground squirrels into my nervous system?

"It looks closed," I said dully. "Must be the wrong army-surplus store."

"No." Grover pointed to the Pinto. "That's Gleeson's car."

Of course it is, I thought. With my luck, how could it not be?

I wanted to run away. I did not like the way that giant red sign washed the asphalt in bloodstained light. But Grover Underwood had led us through the Labyrinth, and after all his talk about losing friends, I was not about to let him lose another.

"Well, then," I said, "let's go find Gleeson Hedge."

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7

Family fun packs
Should be for frozen pizzas
Not for frag grenades

HOW hard could it be to find a satyr in an army-surplus store?

As it turned out, quite hard.

Macro's Military Madness stretched on forever—aisle after aisle of equipment no self-respecting army would want. Near the entrance, a giant bin with a neon purple sign promised PITH HELMETS! BUY 3, GET 1 FREE! An endcap display featured a Christmas tree built of stacked propane tanks with garlands of blowtorch hoses, and a placard that read 'TIS ALWAYS THE SEASON! Two aisles, each a quarter mile long, were entirely devoted to camouflage clothing in every possible color: desert brown, forest green, arctic gray, and hot pink, just in case your spec-ops team needed to infiltrate a child's princess-themed birthday party.

Directory signs hung over each lane: HOCKEY HEAVEN, GRENADE PINS, SLEEPING BAGS, BODY BAGS, KEROSENE LAMPS, CAMPING TENTS, LARGE POINTY STICKS. At the far end of the store, perhaps half a day's hike away, a massive yellow banner screamed FIREARMS!!!

I glanced at Grover, whose face looked even paler under the harsh fluorescents. "Should we start with the camping supplies?" I asked.

The corners of his mouth drifted downward as he scanned a display of rainbow-colored impaling spikes. "Knowing Coach Hedge, he'll gravitate toward the guns."

So we started our trek toward the distant promised land of FIREARMS!!!

I didn't like the store's too-bright lighting. I didn't like the too-cheerful canned music, or the too-cold air-conditioning that made the place feel like a morgue.

The handful of employees ignored us. One young man was label-gunning

50% OFF stickers on a row of Porta-Poo™ portable toilets. Another employee stood unmoving and blank-faced at the express register, as if he had achieved boredom-induced nirvana. Each worker wore a yellow vest with the Macro logo on the back: a smiling Roman centurion making the *okay* sign.

I didn't like that logo, either.

At the front of the store stood a raised booth with a supervisor's desk behind a Plexiglas screen, like the warden's post in a prison. An ox of a man sat there, his bald head gleaming, veins bulging on his neck. His dress shirt and yellow vest could barely contain his bulky arm muscles. His bushy white eyebrows gave him a startled expression. As he watched us walk past, his grin made my skin crawl.

"I don't think we should be here," I muttered to Grover.

He eyed the supervisor. "Pretty sure there are no monsters here or I'd smell them. That guy is human."

This did not reassure me. Some of my least favorite people were human. Nevertheless, I followed Grover deeper into the store.

As he predicted, Gleeson Hedge was in the firearms section, whistling as he stuffed his shopping cart with rifle scopes and barrel brushes.

I saw why Grover called him *Coach.* Hedge wore bright blue double-weave polyester gym shorts that left his hairy goat legs exposed, a red baseball cap that perched between his small horns, a white polo shirt, and a whistle around his neck, as if he expected at any moment to be called in to referee a soccer game.

He looked older than Grover, judging from his sun-weathered face, but it was hard to be sure with satyrs. They matured at roughly half the speed of humans. I knew Grover was thirty-ish in people years, for instance, but only sixteen in satyr terms. The coach could have been anywhere between forty and a hundred in human time.

"Gleeson!" Grover called.

The coach turned and grinned. His cart overflowed with quivers, crates of ammo, and plastic-sealed rows of grenades that promised FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!!!

"Hey, Underwood!" he said. "Good timing! Help me pick some land mines."

Grover flinched. "Land mines?"

"Well, they're just empty casings," Gleeson said, gesturing toward a row of metal canisters that looked like canteens, "but I figured we could fill them with explosives and make them active again! You like the World War II models or the Vietnam-era kind?"

"Uh…" Grover grabbed me and shoved me forward. "Gleeson, this is Apollo."

Gleeson frowned. "Apollo…like *Apollo* Apollo?" He scanned me from

head to toe. “It’s even worse than we thought. Kid, you gotta do more core exercises.”

“Thanks.” I sighed. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“I could whip you into shape,” Hedge mused. “But first, help me out. Stake mines? Claymores? What do you think?”

“I thought you were buying camping supplies.”

Gleeson arched his brow. “These *are* camping supplies. If I have to be outdoors with my wife and kid, holed up in that cistern, I’m going to feel a lot better knowing I’m armed to the teeth and surrounded by pressure-detonated explosives! I got a family to protect!”

“But…” I glanced at Grover, who shook his head as if to say *Don’t even try*.

At this point, dear reader, you may be wondering *Apollo, why would you object? Gleeson Hedge has it right! Why mess around with swords and bows when you can fight monsters with land mines and machine guns?*

Alas, when one is fighting ancient forces, modern weapons are unreliable at best. The mechanisms of standard mortal-made guns and bombs tend to jam in supernatural situations. Explosions may or may not get the job done, and regular ammunition only serves to annoy most monsters. Some heroes do indeed use firearms, but their ammo must be crafted from magical metals—Celestial bronze, Imperial gold, Stygian iron, and so on.

Unfortunately, these materials are rare. Magically crafted bullets are finicky. They can be used only once before disintegrating, whereas a sword made from magical metal will last for millennia. It’s simply impractical to “spray and pray” when fighting a gorgon or a hydra.

“I think you already have a great assortment of supplies,” I said. “Besides, Mellie is worried. You’ve been gone all day.”

“No, I haven’t!” Hedge protested. “Wait. What time is it?”

“After dark,” Grover said.

Coach Hedge blinked. “Seriously? Ah, hockey pucks. I guess I spent too long in the grenade aisle. Well, fine. I suppose—”

“Excuse me,” said a voice at my back.

The subsequent high-pitched yelp may have come from Grover. Or possibly me, who can be sure? I spun around to find that the huge bald man from the supervisor’s booth had sneaked up behind us. This was quite a trick, since he was almost seven feet tall and must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. He was flanked by two employees, both staring impassively into space, holding label guns.

The manager grinned, his bushy white eyebrows creeping heavenward, his teeth the many colors of tombstone marble.

“I’m *so* sorry to interrupt,” he said. “We don’t get many celebrities and I

just—I had to be sure. Are you Apollo? I mean…*the* Apollo?"

He sounded delighted by the possibility. I looked at my satyr companions. Gleeson nodded. Grover shook his head vigorously.

"And if I *were* Apollo?" I asked the manager.

"Oh, we'd comp your purchases!" the manager cried. "We'd roll out the red carpet!"

That was a dirty trick. I'd always been a sucker for the red carpet.

"Well, then, yes," I said, "I'm Apollo."

The manager squealed—a sound not unlike the Erymanthian Boar made that time I shot him in the hindquarters. "I *knew* it! I'm such a fan. My name is Macro. Welcome to my store!"

He glanced at his two employees. "Bring out the red carpet so we can roll Apollo up in it, will you? But first let's make the satyrs' deaths quick and painless. This is *such* an honor!"

The employees raised their labeling guns, ready to mark us down as clearance items.

"Wait!" I cried.

The employees hesitated. Up close, I could see how much they looked alike: the same greasy mops of dark hair, the same glazed eyes, the same rigid postures. They might have been twins, or—a horrible thought seeped into my brain—products of the same assembly line.

"I, um, er…" I said, poetic to the last. "What if I'm not really Apollo?"

Macro's grin lost some of its wattage. "Well, then, I'd have to kill you for disappointing me."

"Okay, I'm Apollo," I said. "But you can't just kill your customers. That's no way to run an army-surplus store!"

Behind me, Grover wrestled with Coach Hedge, who was desperately trying to claw open a family fun pack of grenades while cursing the tamper-proof packaging.

Macro clasped his meaty hands. "I know it's terribly rude. I do apologize, Lord Apollo."

"So…you won't kill us?"

"Well, as I said, I won't kill *you*. The emperor has plans for you. He needs you alive!"

"Plans," I said.

I hated plans. They reminded me of annoying things like Zeus's once-a-century goal-setting meetings, or dangerously complicated attacks. Or Athena.

"B-but my friends," I stammered. "You can't kill the satyrs. A god of my stature can't be rolled up in a red carpet without my retinue!"

Macro regarded the satyrs, who were still fighting over the plastic-wrapped grenades.

“Hmm,” said the manager. “I’m sorry, Lord Apollo, but you see, this may be my only chance to get back into the emperor’s good graces. I’m fairly sure he won’t want the satyrs.”

“You mean…you’re *out* of the emperor’s good graces?”

Macro heaved a sigh. He began rolling up his sleeves as if he expected some hard, dreary satyr-murdering ahead. “I’m afraid so. I certainly didn’t *ask* to be exiled to Palm Springs! Alas, the princeps is very particular about his security forces. My troops malfunctioned one too many times, and he shipped us out here. He replaced us with that horrible assortment of strixes and mercenaries and Big Ears. Can you believe it?”

I could neither believe it nor understand it. *Big ears?*

I examined the two employees, still frozen in place, label guns ready, eyes unfocused, faces expressionless.

“Your employees are automatons,” I realized. “These are the emperor’s former troops?”

“Alas, yes,” Macro said. “They are *fully* capable, though. Once I deliver you, the emperor will surely see that and forgive me.”

His sleeves were above his elbows now, revealing old white scars, as if his forearms had been clawed by a desperate victim many years ago….

I remembered my dream of the imperial palace, the praetor kneeling before his new emperor.

Too late, I remembered the name of that praetor. “Naevius Sutorius Macro.”

Macro beamed at his robotic employees. “I can’t *believe* Apollo remembers me. This is such an honor!”

His robotic employees remained unimpressed.

“You killed Emperor Tiberius,” I said. “Smothered him with a pillow.”

Macro looked abashed. “Well, he was ninety percent dead already. I simply helped matters along.”

“And you did it for”—an ice-cold burrito of dread sank into my stomach —“the next emperor. Neos Helios. It *is* him.”

Macro nodded eagerly. “That’s right! The one, the only Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus!”

He spread his arms as if waiting for applause.

The satyrs stopped fighting. Hedge continued chewing on the grenade pack, though even his satyr teeth were having trouble with the thick plastic.

Grover backed away, putting the cart between himself and the store employees. “G-Gaius who?” He glanced at me. “Apollo, what does that mean?”

I gulped. “It means we run. Now!”

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8

We blow up some things
You thought all the things blew up?
No, we found more things

MOST satyrs excel at running away.

Gleeson Hedge, however, was not most satyrs. He grabbed a barrel brush from his cart, yelled “DIE!” and charged the three-hundred-pound manager.

Even the automatons were too surprised to react, which probably saved Hedge’s life. I grabbed the satyr’s collar and dragged him backward as the employees’ first shots went wild, a barrage of bright orange discount stickers flying over our heads.

I pulled Hedge down the aisle as he launched a fierce kick, overturning his shopping cart at our enemies’ feet. Another discount sticker grazed my arm with the force of an angry Titaness’s slap.

“Careful!” Macro yelled at his men. “I need Apollo in one piece, not half-off!”

Gleeson clawed at the shelves, grabbed a demo-model Macro’s Self-Lighting Molotov Cocktail™ (BUY ONE, GET TWO FREE!), and tossed it at the store employees with the battle cry “Eat surplus!”

Macro shrieked as the Molotov cocktail landed amid Hedge’s scattered ammo boxes and, true to its advertising, burst into flames.

“Up and over!” Hedge tackled me around the waist. He slung me over his shoulder like a sack of soccer balls and scaled the shelves in an epic display of goat-climbing, leaping into the next aisle as crates of ammunition exploded behind us.

We landed in a pile of rolled-up sleeping bags.

“Keep moving!” Hedge yelled, as if the thought might not have occurred to me.

I scrambled after him, my ears ringing. From the aisle we’d just left, I

heard bangs and screams as if Macro were running across a hot skillet strewn with popcorn kernels.

I saw no sign of Grover.

When we reached the end of the aisle, a store clerk rounded the corner, his label gun raised.

"Hi-YA!" Hedge executed a roundhouse kick on him.

This was a notoriously difficult move. Even Ares sometimes fell and broke his tailbone when practicing it in his dojo (witness the *Ares-so-lame* video that went viral on Mount Olympus last year, and which I absolutely was *not* responsible for uploading).

To my surprise, Coach Hedge executed it perfectly. His hoof connected with the clerk's face, knocking the automaton's head clean off. The body dropped to its knees and fell forward, wires sparking in its neck.

"Wow." Gleeson examined his hoof. "I guess that Iron Goat conditioning wax really works!"

The clerk's decapitated body gave me flashbacks to the Indianapolis *blemmyae*, who lost their fake heads with great regularity, but I had no time to dwell on the terrible past when I had such a terrible present to deal with.

Behind us, Macro called, "Oh, what have you done now?"

The manager stood at the far end of the lane, his clothes smeared with soot, his yellow vest peppered with so many holes it looked like a smoking piece of Swiss cheese. Yet somehow—just my luck—he appeared unharmed. The second store clerk stood behind him, apparently unconcerned that his robotic head was on fire.

"Apollo," Macro chided, "there's no point in fighting my automatons. This is a military-*surplus* store. I have fifty more just like these in storage."

I glanced at Hedge. "Let's get out of here."

"Yeah." Hedge grabbed a croquet mallet from a nearby rack. "Fifty may be too many even for me."

We skirted the camping tents, then zigzagged through Hockey Heaven, trying to make our way back to the store entrance. A few aisles away, Macro was shouting orders: "Get them! I'm not going to be forced to commit suicide again!"

"Again?" Hedge muttered, ducking under the arm of a hockey mannequin.

"He worked for the emperor." I panted, trying to keep up. "Old friends. But—*wheeze*—emperor didn't trust him. Ordered his arrest—*wheeze*—execution."

We stopped at an endcap. Gleeson peeked around the corner for signs of hostiles.

"So Macro committed suicide instead?" Hedge asked. "What a moron.

Why's he working for this emperor again, if the guy wanted him killed?"

I wiped the sweat from my eyes. Honestly, why did mortal bodies have to sweat so much? "I imagine the emperor brought him back to life, gave him a second chance. Romans have strange ideas about loyalty."

Hedge grunted. "Speaking of which, where's Grover?"

"Halfway back to the Cistern, if he's smart."

Hedge frowned. "Nah. Can't believe he'd do that. Well…" He pointed ahead, where sliding glass doors led out to the parking lot. The coach's yellow Pinto was parked tantalizingly close—which is the first time *yellow*, *Pinto*, and *tantalizingly* have ever been used together in a sentence. "You ready?"

We charged the doors.

The doors did not cooperate. I slammed into one and bounced right off. Gleeson hammered at the glass with his croquet mallet, then tried a few Chuck Norris kicks, but even his Iron Goat–waxed hooves didn't leave a scratch.

Behind us, Macro said, "Oh, dear."

I turned, trying to suppress a whimper. The manager stood twenty feet away, under a whitewater raft that was suspended from the ceiling with a sign across its prow: BOATLOADS OF SAVINGS! I was beginning to appreciate why the emperor had ordered Macro arrested and executed. For such a big man, he was much too good at sneaking up on people.

"Those glass doors are bombproof," Macro said. "We have some for sale this week in our fallout shelter improvement department, but I suppose that wouldn't do you any good."

From various aisles, more yellow-vested employees converged—a dozen identical automatons, some covered in Bubble Wrap as if they'd just broken out of storage. They formed a rough semicircle behind Macro.

I drew my bow. I fired a shot at Macro, but my hands shook so badly the arrow missed, embedding itself in an automaton's Bubble-Wrapped forehead with a crisp *pop!* The robot barely seemed to notice.

"Hmm." Macro grimaced. "You really are quite mortal, aren't you? I guess it's true what people say: 'Never meet your gods. They'll only disappoint you.' I just hope there's enough of you left for the emperor's magical friend to work with."

"Enough of m-me?" I stammered. "M-magical friend?"

I waited for Gleeson Hedge to do something clever and heroic. Surely he had a portable bazooka in the pocket of his gym shorts. Or perhaps his coach's whistle was magic. But Hedge looked as cornered and desperate as I felt, which wasn't fair. Cornered and desperate was *my* job.

Macro cracked his knuckles. "It's a shame, really. I'm much more loyal than *she* is, but I shouldn't complain. Once I bring you to the emperor, I'll be rewarded! My automatons will be given a second chance as the emperor's

personal guard! After that, what do I care? The sorceress can take you into the maze and do her magic."

"H-her magic?"

Hedge hefted his croquet mallet. "I'll take out as many as I can," he muttered to me. "You find another exit."

I appreciated the sentiment. Unfortunately, I didn't think the satyr would be able to buy me much of a head start. Also, I didn't like the idea of returning to that kind, sleep-deprived cloud nymph, Mellie, and informing her that her husband had been killed by a squad of Bubble-Wrapped robots. Oh, my mortal sympathies *really* were getting the best of me!

"Who is this sorceress?" I demanded. "What—what does she intend to do with me?"

Macro's smile was cold and insincere. I had used that smile myself many times in the old days, whenever some Greek town prayed to me to save them from a plague and I had to break the news: *Gee, I'm sorry, but I* caused *that plague because I don't like you. Have a nice day!*

"You'll see soon enough," Macro promised. "I didn't believe her when she said you'd walk right into our trap, but here you are. She predicted that you wouldn't be able to resist the Burning Maze. Ah, well. Military Madness team members, kill the satyr and apprehend the former god!"

The automatons shuffled forward.

At the same moment, a blur of green, red, and brown near the ceiling caught my eye—a satyr-like shape leaping from the top of the nearest aisle, swinging off a fluorescent light fixture, and landing in the whitewater raft above Macro's head.

Before I could shout *Grover Underwood!* the raft landed on top of Macro and his minions, burying them under a boatload of savings. Grover leaped free, a paddle in his hand, and yelled, "Come on!"

The confusion allowed us a few moments to flee, but with the exit doors locked, we could only run deeper into the store.

"Nice one!" Hedge slapped Grover on the back as we raced through the camouflage department. "I knew you wouldn't leave us!"

"Yes, but there's no nature *anywhere* in here," Grover complained. "No plants. No dirt. No natural light. How are we supposed to fight in these conditions?"

"Guns!" Hedge suggested.

"That whole part of the store is on fire," Grover said, "thanks to a Molotov cocktail and some ammo boxes."

"Curses!" said the coach.

We passed a display of martial arts weapons, and Hedge's eyes lit up. He quickly exchanged his croquet mallet for a pair of nunchaku. "Now we're talking! You guys want some shurikens or a kusarigama?"

“I want to *run away*,” Grover said, shaking his boat paddle. “Coach, you have to stop thinking about full-frontal assaults! You have a family!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Coach growled. “We *tried* settling down with the McLeans in LA. Look how well *that* turned out.”

I guessed there was a story there—why they had come from LA, why Hedge sounded so bitter about it—but while fleeing from enemies in a surplus store was perhaps not the best time to talk about it.

“I suggest we find another exit,” I said. “We can run away and argue about ninja weapons at the same time.”

This compromise seemed to satisfy them both.

We sped past a display of inflatable swimming pools (How were those military surplus?), then turned a corner and saw in front of us, at the far rear corner of the building, a set of double doors labeled EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Grover and Hedge charged ahead, leaving me gasping in their wake. From somewhere nearby, Macro’s voice called, “You can’t escape, Apollo! I’ve already called the Horse. He’ll be here any minute!”

The horse?

Why did that term send a B major chord of terror vibrating through my bones? I searched my jumbled memories for a clear answer but came up empty.

My first thought: Maybe “the Horse” was a nom de guerre. Perhaps the emperor employed an evil wrestler who wore a black satin cape, shiny spandex shorts, and a horse-head-shaped helmet.

My second thought: Why did Macro get to call for backup when I could not? Demigod communications had been magically sabotaged for months. Phones short-circuited. Computers melted. Iris-messages and magical scrolls failed to work. Yet our enemies seemed to have no trouble texting each other messages like *Apollo, my place. Where U @? Help me kill him!*

It wasn’t fair.

Fair would have been me getting my immortal powers back and blasting our enemies to tiny pieces.

We burst through the EMPLOYEES ONLY doors. Inside was a storage room/loading bay filled with more Bubble-Wrapped automatons, all standing silent and lifeless like the crowd at one of Hestia’s housewarming parties. (She may be the goddess of the family hearth, but the lady has no clue about how to throw a party.)

Gleeson and Grover ran past the robots and began tugging at the rolling metal garage door that sealed off the loading dock.

“Locked.” Hedge whacked the door with his nunchaku.

I peered out the tiny plastic windows of the employee doors. Macro and his minions were barreling in our direction. “Run or stay?” I asked. “We’re about to be cornered again.”

“Apollo, what have you got?” Hedge demanded.

“What do you mean?”

“What’s the ace up your sleeve? I did the Molotov cocktail. Grover dropped the boat. It’s your turn. Godly fire, maybe? We could use some godly fire.”

“I have *zero* godly fire up my sleeves!”

“We stay,” Grover decided. He tossed me his boat paddle. “Apollo, block those doors.”

“But—”

“Just keep Macro out!” Grover must have been taking assertiveness lessons from Meg. I jumped to comply.

“Coach,” Grover continued, “can you play a song of opening for the loading-dock door?”

Hedge grunted. “Haven’t done one of those in years, but I’ll try. What’ll *you* be doing?”

Grover studied the dormant automatons. “Something my friend Annabeth taught me. Hurry!”

I slipped the paddle through the door handles, then lugged over a tetherball pole and braced it against the door. Hedge began to trill a tune on his coach’s whistle—“The Entertainer” by Scott Joplin. I’d never thought of the whistle as a musical instrument. Coach Hedge’s performance did nothing to change my mind.

Meanwhile Grover ripped the plastic off the nearest automaton. He rapped his knuckles against its forehead, which made a hollow clang.

“Celestial bronze, all right,” Grover decided. “This might work!”

“What are you going to do?” I demanded. “Melt them down for weapons?”

“No, activate them to work for us.”

“They won’t help *us*! They belong to Macro!”

Speak of the praetor: Macro pushed against the doors, rattling the paddle and the tetherball-pole brace. “Oh, come on, Apollo! Stop being difficult!”

Grover pulled the Bubble Wrap off another automaton. “During the Battle of Manhattan,” he said, “when we were fighting Kronos, Annabeth told us about an override command written into the firmware of automatons.”

“That’s only for public statuary in Manhattan!” I said. “Every god who’s *any* god knows that! You can’t expect these things to respond to ‘command sequence: Daedalus twenty-three’!”

Instantly, as in a scary episode of *Doctor Who*, the plastic-wrapped automatons snapped to attention and turned to face me.

“Yes!” Grover yelled gleefully.

I did not feel so gleeful. I’d just activated a room full of metal temp workers who were more likely to kill me than obey me. I had no idea how

Annabeth Chase had figured out that the Daedalus command could be used on any automaton. Then again, she'd been able to redesign my palace on Mount Olympus with perfect acoustics and surround-sound speakers in the bathroom, so her cleverness shouldn't have surprised me.

Coach Hedge kept trilling Scott Joplin. The loading-bay door didn't move. Macro and his men banged against my makeshift barricade, nearly making me lose my grip on the tetherball pole.

"Apollo, talk to the automatons!" Grover said. "They're waiting for *your* orders now. Tell them *begin Plan Thermopylae*!"

I didn't like being reminded of Thermopylae. So many brave and attractive Spartans had died in that battle defending Greece from the Persians. But I did as I was told. "Begin Plan Thermopylae!"

At that moment, Macro and his twelve servants busted through the doors —snapping the paddle, knocking aside the tetherball pole, and launching me into the midst of my new metal acquaintances.

Macro stumbled to a halt, six minions fanning out on either side. "What's this? Apollo, you can't activate my automatons! You haven't paid for them! Military Madness team members, apprehend Apollo! Tear the satyrs apart! Stop that infernal whistling!"

Two things saved us from instant death. First, Macro had made the mistake of issuing too many orders at once. As any maestro can tell you, a conductor should never simultaneously order the violins to speed up, the timpani to soften, and the brass to crescendo. You will end up with a symphonic train wreck. Macro's poor soldiers were left to decide for themselves whether they should first apprehend me, or tear apart the satyrs, or stop the whistling. (Personally, I would have gone after the whistler with extreme prejudice.)

The other thing that saved us? Rather than listening to Macro, our new temp-worker friends began executing Plan Thermopylae. They shuffled forward, linking their arms and surrounding Macro and his companions, who awkwardly tried to get around their robotic colleagues and bumped into each other in confusion. (The scene was reminding me more of a Hestia housewarming by the second.)

"Stop this!" Macro shrieked. "I order you to stop!"

This only added to the confusion. Macro's faithful minions froze in their tracks, allowing our Daedalus-operated dudes to encircle Macro's group.

"No, not *you*!" Macro yelled to his minions. "*You* all don't stop! *You* keep fighting!" Which did nothing to clarify the situation.

The Daedalus dudes encircled their comrades, squeezing them in a massive group hug. Despite Macro's size and strength, he was trapped in the center, squirming and shoving uselessly.

"No! I can't—!" He spat Bubble Wrap from his mouth. "Help! The Horse

can’t see me like this!”

From deep in their chests, the Daedalus dudes began to emit a hum, like engines stuck in the wrong gear. Steam rose from the seams of their necks.

I backed away, as one does when a group of robots starts to steam. “Grover, what exactly *is* Plan Thermopylae?”

The satyr gulped. “Er, they’re supposed to stand their ground so we can retreat.”

“Then why are they steaming?” I asked. “Also, why are they starting to glow red?”

“Oh, dear.” Grover chewed his lower lip. “They may have confused Plan Thermopylae with Plan Petersburg.”

“Which means—?”

“They may be about to sacrifice themselves in a fiery explosion.”

“Coach!” I yelled. “Whistle better!”

I threw myself at the loading-bay door, working my fingers under the bottom and lifting with all my pathetic mortal strength. I whistled along with Hedge’s frantic tune. I even tap-danced a little, since that is well-known to speed up musical spells.

Behind us, Macro shrieked, “Hot! Hot!”

My clothes felt uncomfortably warm, as if I were sitting at the edge of a bonfire. After our experience with the wall of flames in the Labyrinth, I did not want to take my chances with a group hug/explosion in this small room.

“Lift!” I yelled. “Whistle!”

Grover joined in our desperate Joplin performance. Finally, the loading-bay door began to budge, creaking in protest as we raised it a few inches off the floor.

Macro’s shrieking became unintelligible. The humming and heat reminded me of that moment just before my sun chariot would take off, blasting into the sky in a triumph of solar power.

“Go!” I yelled to the satyrs. “Both of you, roll under!”

I thought that was quite heroic of me—though to be honest, I half expected them to insist *Oh, no, please! Gods first!*

No such courtesy. The satyrs shimmied under the door, then held it from the other side while I tried to wriggle through the gap. Alas, I found myself stymied by my own accursed love handles. In short, I got stuck.

“Apollo, come on!” Grover yelled.

“I’m trying!”

“Suck it in, boy!” screamed the coach.

I’d never had a personal trainer before. Gods simply don’t need someone yelling at them, shaming them into working harder. And honestly, who would want that job, knowing you could get zapped by lightning the first time you chided your client into doing an extra five push-ups?

This time, however, I was glad to be yelled at. The coach's exhortations gave me the extra burst of motivation I needed to squeeze my flabby mortal body through the gap.

No sooner had I gotten to my feet than Grover yelled, "Dive!"

We leaped off the edge of the loading dock as the steel door—which was apparently *not* bombproof—exploded behind us.

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9

Collect call from Horse
Do you accept the charges?
Nay-ay-ay-ay-ay

OH, villainy!

Please explain to me why I always end up falling into dumpsters.

I must confess, however, that this dumpster saved my life. Macro's Military Madness went up in a chain of explosions that shook the desert, rattling the flaps of the foul-smelling metal box that sheltered us. Sweating and shivering, barely able to breathe, the two satyrs and I huddled amid trash bags and listened to the pitter-patter of debris raining from the sky—an unexpected downpour of wood, plaster, glass, and sporting equipment.

After what seemed like years, I was about to risk speaking—something like *Get me out of here or I'm going to vomit*—when Grover clamped his hand over my mouth. I could barely see him in the dark, but he shook his head urgently, his eyes wide with alarm. Coach Hedge also looked tense. His nose quivered as if he smelled something even worse than the garbage.

Then I heard the *clop, clop, clop* of hooves against asphalt as they approached our hiding place.

A deep voice grumbled, "Well, this is just perfect."

An animal's muzzle snuffled the rim of our dumpster, perhaps smelling for survivors. For us.

I tried not to weep or wet my pants. I succeeded at one of those. I'll let you decide which.

The flaps of the dumpster remained closed. Perhaps the garbage and the burning warehouse masked our scent.

"Hey, Big C?" said the same deep voice. "Yeah. It's me."

From the lack of audible response, I guessed the newcomer was talking on the phone.

“Nah, the place is *gone*. I don’t know. Macro must have—” He paused, as if the person on the other end had launched into a tirade.

“I know,” said the newcomer. “Could’ve been a false alarm, but…Ah, nuts. Human police are on the way.”

A moment after he said that, I heard the faint sound of sirens in the distance.

“I could search the area,” the newcomer suggested. “Maybe check those ruins up the hill.”

Hedge and Grover exchanged a worried look. Surely the ruins meant our sanctuary, currently housing Mellie, Baby Hedge, and Meg.

“I know you *think* you took care of it,” said the newcomer. “But, look, that place is still dangerous. I’m telling you—” This time I could hear a faint, tinny voice raging on the other end of the line.

“Okay, C,” said the newcomer. “Yes. Jupiter’s jumpers, calm down! I’ll just—Fine. Fine. I’m on my way back.”

His exasperated sigh told me the call must have ended.

“Kid’s gonna give me colic,” the speaker grumbled aloud to himself.

Something slammed into the side of our dumpster, right next to my face. Then the hooves galloped away.

Several minutes passed before I felt safe enough even to look at the two satyrs. We silently agreed that we had to get out of the dumpster before we died of suffocation, heatstroke, or the smell of my pants.

Outside, the alley was littered with smoking chunks of twisted metal and plastic. The warehouse itself was a blackened shell, flames still swirling within, adding more columns of smoke to the ash-choked night sky.

“W-who was that?” Grover asked. “He smelled like a guy on a horse, but…”

Coach Hedge’s nunchaku clattered in his hands. “Maybe a centaur?”

“No.” I put my hand on the dented metal side of the dumpster—which now bore the unmistakable impression of a shod hoof. “He was a horse. A talking horse.”

The satyrs stared at me.

“All horses talk,” Grover said. “They just talk in Horse.”

“Wait.” Hedge frowned at me. “You mean you *understood* the horse?”

“Yes,” I said. “That horse spoke in English.”

They waited for me to explain, but I couldn’t make myself say more. Now that we were out of immediate danger, now that my adrenaline was ebbing, I found myself gripped by a cold, heavy despair. If I’d harbored any last hopes that I might be wrong about the enemy we were facing, those hopes had been torpedoed.

Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus…strangely enough, that name could have applied to several famous ancient Romans. But the master of

Naevius Sutorius Macro? *Big C? Neos Helios?* The only Roman emperor ever to possess a talking horse? That could mean only one person. One *terrible* person.

The flashing lights of emergency vehicles pulsed against the fronds of the nearest palm trees.

"We need to get out of here," I said.

Gleeson stared at the wreckage of the surplus store. "Yeah. Let's go around front, see if my car survived. I just wish I got some camping supplies out of this deal."

"We got something much worse." I took a shaky breath. "We got the identity of the third emperor."

The explosion hadn't scathed the coach's yellow 1979 Ford Pinto. Of course it hadn't. Such a hideous car couldn't be destroyed by anything less than a worldwide apocalypse. I sat in back, wearing a new pair of hot-pink camo pants we'd salvaged from the army surplus wreckage. I was in such a stupor, I barely remember going through the drive-through lane of Enchiladas del Rey and picking up enough combo plates to feed several dozen nature spirits.

Back at the hilltop ruins, we convened a council of the cacti.

The Cistern was packed with desert-plant dryads: Joshua Tree, Prickly Pear, Aloe Vera, and many more, all dressed in bristly clothes and doing their best not to poke each other.

Mellie fussed over Gleeson, one minute showering him with kisses and telling him how brave he was, the next minute punching him and accusing him of wanting her to raise Baby Hedge by herself as a widow. The infant—whose name, I learned, was Chuck—was awake and none too happy, kicking his little hooves into his father's stomach as Gleeson tried to hold him, tugging Hedge's goatee with his chubby little fists.

"On the bright side," Hedge told Mellie, "we got enchiladas and I scored some awesome nunchaku!"

Mellie gazed heavenward, perhaps wishing she could go back to her simple life as an unmarried cloud.

As for Meg McCaffrey, she had regained consciousness and looked as well as she ever looked—just slightly greasier thanks to the first-aid ministrations of Aloe Vera. Meg sat at the edge of the pool, trailing her bare feet in the water and stealing glances at Joshua Tree, who stood nearby, brooding handsomely in his khakis.

I asked Meg how she was feeling—because I am nothing if not thoughtful—but she waved me off, insisting she was fine. I think she was just embarrassed by my presence as she tried to discreetly ogle Joshua, which made me roll my eyes.

Girl, I see you, I felt like saying. *You are not subtle, and we really need to have a talk about crushing on dryads.*

I didn't want her to order me to slap myself, however, so I kept my mouth shut.

Grover distributed enchilada plates to everyone. He ate nothing himself—a sure sign of how nervous he felt—but paced the circumference of the pool, tapping his fingers against his reed pipes.

"Guys," he announced, "we've got problems."

I would not have imagined Grover Underwood as a leader. Nevertheless, as he spoke, all the other nature spirits gave him their full attention. Even Baby Chuck quieted down, tilting his head toward Grover's voice as if it was something interesting and possibly worth kicking.

Grover related everything that had happened to us since we'd met up in Indianapolis. He recounted our days in the Labyrinth—the pits and poison lakes, the sudden wave of fire, the flock of strixes, and the spiral ramp that had led us up to these ruins.

The dryads looked around nervously, as if imagining the Cistern filled with demonic owls.

"You sure we're safe?" asked a short plump girl with a lilting accent and red flowers in her hair (or perhaps sprouting from her hair).

"I don't know, Reba." Grover glanced at Meg and me. "This is Rebutia, guys. Reba, for short. She's a transplant from Argentina."

I waved politely. I'd never met an Argentinian cactus before, but I had a soft spot for Buenos Aires. You haven't really tangoed until you've tangoed with a Greek god at La Ventana.

Grover continued, "I don't think that exit from the maze has ever been there before. It's sealed now. I think the Labyrinth was helping us, bringing us home."

"Helping us?" Prickly Pear looked up from her cheese enchiladas. "The same Labyrinth harboring fires that are destroying the whole state? The same Labyrinth we've been exploring for months, trying to find the source of those fires, with no luck? The same Labyrinth that's swallowed a dozen of our search parties? What does it look like when the Labyrinth *isn't* helping us?"

The other dryads grumbled in agreement. Some bristled, literally.

Grover raised his hands for calm. "I know we're all worried and frustrated. But the Burning Maze isn't the entire Labyrinth. And at least now we have some idea *why* the emperor set it up the way he did. It's because of Apollo."

Dozens of cactus spirits turned to stare at me.

"Just to clarify," I said in a small voice, "it's not my *fault*. Tell them, Grover. Tell your very nice…very spiny friends it isn't my fault."

Coach Hedge grunted. “Well, it kind of *is*. Macro said the maze was a trap for you. Probably because of the Oracle thingie you’re looking for.”

Mellie’s gaze ping-ponged between her husband and me. “Macro? Oracle thingie?”

I explained how Zeus had me traveling around the country, freeing ancient Oracles as part of my penance, because that’s just the sort of horrible father he was.

Hedge then recounted our fun shopping expedition to Macro’s Military Madness. When he got sidetracked talking about the various types of land mines he’d found, Grover intervened.

“So we exploded Macro,” Grover summed up, “who was a Roman follower of this emperor. And he mentioned some kind of a sorceress who wants to…I dunno, do some evil magic on Apollo, I guess. And she’s helping the emperor. And we think they put the next Oracle—”

“The Sibyl of Erythraea,” I said.

“Right,” Grover agreed. “We think they put her at the center of the maze as some sort of bait for Apollo. Also, there’s a talking horse.”

Mellie’s face clouded over, which was unsurprising since she was a cloud. “All horses talk.”

Grover explained what we’d heard in the dumpster. Then he backed up and explained why we’d been in a dumpster. Then he explained how I’d wet my pants and that was why I was wearing hot-pink camo.

“Ohhh.” All the dryads nodded, as if *this* was the real question that had been bothering them.

“Can we get back to the problem at hand?” I pleaded. “We have a common cause! You want the fires stopped. I have a quest to free the Erythraean Sibyl. Both those things require us to find the heart of the maze. That’s where we’ll find the source of the flames *and* the Sibyl. I just—I *know* it.”

Meg studied me intently, as if trying to decide what embarrassing order she should give me: *Jump in the pool? Hug Prickly Pear? Find a shirt that matches your pants?*

“Tell me about the horse,” she said.

Order received. I had no choice. “His name is Incitatus.”

“And he talks,” Meg said. “Like, in a way humans can understand.”

“Yes, though normally he only speaks to the emperor. Don’t ask me *how* he talks. Or where he came from. I don’t know. He’s a magical horse. The emperor trusts him, probably more than he trusts anyone. Back when the emperor ruled ancient Rome, he dressed Incitatus in senatorial purple, even tried to make him a consul. People thought the emperor was crazy, but he was never crazy.”

Meg leaned over the pool, hunching her shoulders as if withdrawing into her mental shell. With Meg, emperors were always a touchy subject. Raised in Nero's household (though the terms *abused* and *gaslighted* were more accurate), she'd betrayed me to Nero at Camp Half-Blood before returning to me in Indianapolis—a subject we'd skirted without really addressing for a while. I did not blame the poor girl. Truly. But getting her to trust my friendship, to trust *anyone* after her stepfather, Nero, was like training a wild squirrel to eat out of one's hand. Any loud noise was liable to cause her to flee, or bite, or both.

(I realize that's not a fair comparison. Meg bites *much* harder than a wild squirrel.)

Finally she said, "That line from the prophecy: *The master of the swift white horse.*"

I nodded. "Incitatus belongs to the emperor. Or perhaps *belong* isn't the right word. Incitatus is the right-hand horse to the man who now claims the western United States—Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus."

This was the dryads' cue for a collective gasp of horror, and perhaps some ominous background music. Instead, blank faces greeted me. The only ominous background sound was Baby Chuck chewing the Styrofoam lid of his father's #3 dinner especial.

"This Gaius person," said Meg. "Is he famous?"

I stared at the dark waters of the pool. I almost wished Meg *would* order me to jump in and drown. Or force me to wear a shirt that matched my hot-pink pants. Either punishment would have been easier than answering her question.

"The emperor is better known by his childhood nickname," I said. "Which he despises, by the way. History remembers him as Caligula."

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10

Cute kid you got there
With the itty-bitty boots
And murderous grin

DO you know the name Caligula, dear reader?

If not, consider yourself lucky.

All around the Cistern, cactus dryads puffed out their spikes. Mellie's lower half dissolved into mist. Even Baby Chuck coughed up a piece of Styrofoam.

"Caligula?" Coach Hedge's eye twitched the same way it had when Mellie threatened to take away his ninja weapons. "Are you sure?"

I wished I wasn't. I wished I could announce that the third emperor was kindly old Marcus Aurelius, or noble Hadrian, or bumbling Claudius.

But Caligula…

Even for those who knew little about him, the name Caligula conjured the darkest, most depraved images. His reign was bloodier and more infamous than Nero's, who had grown up in awe of his wicked great-uncle Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus.

Caligula: a byword for murder, torture, madness, excess. Caligula: the villainous tyrant against whom all other villainous tyrants were measured. Caligula: who had a worse branding problem than the Edsel, the Hindenburg, and the Chicago Black Sox put together.

Grover shuddered. "I've always hated that name. What does it mean, anyway? Satyr Killer? Blood Drinker?"

"Booties," I said.

Joshua's shaggy olive hair stood straight up, which Meg seemed to find fascinating.

"Booties?" Joshua glanced around the Cistern, perhaps wondering if he'd missed the joke. No one was laughing.

“Yes.” I could still remember how cute little Caligula had looked in his miniature legionnaire’s outfit when he accompanied his father, Germanicus, on military campaigns. Why were sociopaths always so *adorable* as children?

“His father’s soldiers gave Caligula the nickname when he was a child,” I said. “He wore teeny-weenie legionnaire’s boots, *caligae,* and they thought that was hysterical. So they called him Caligula—*Little Boots,* or *Baby Shoes,* or *Booties.* Pick your translation.”

Prickly Pear stabbed her fork into her enchiladas. “I don’t care if the guy’s name is Snookums McCuddleFace. How do we *beat* him and get our lives back to normal?”

The other cacti grumbled and nodded. I was starting to suspect that prickly pears were the natural agitators of the cactus world. Get enough of them together, and they would start a revolution and overthrow the animal kingdom.

“We have to be careful,” I warned. “Caligula is a master at trapping his enemies. The old saying *Give them enough rope to hang themselves*? That was *made* for Caligula. He delights in his reputation as a madman, but it’s just a cover. He’s quite sane. He’s also completely amoral, even worse than…”

I stopped myself. I’d been about to say *worse than Nero,* but how could I make such a claim in front of Meg, whose entire childhood had been poisoned by Nero and his alter ego, the Beast?

Careful, Meg, Nero would always say. *Don’t misbehave or you’ll wake the Beast. I love you dearly, but the Beast…Well, I would hate to see you do something wrong and get hurt.*

How could I quantify such villainy?

“Anyway,” I said, “Caligula is smart, patient, and paranoid. If this Burning Maze is some elaborate trap, part of some bigger plan of his, it won’t be easy to shut down. And beating him, even *finding* him, will be a challenge.” I was tempted to add *Perhaps we don’t* want *to find him. Perhaps we should run away.*

That wouldn’t work for the dryads. They were rooted, quite literally, to the land in which they grew. Transplants like Reba were rare. Few nature spirits could survive being potted and transported to a new environment. Even if every dryad here managed to flee the fires of Southern California, thousands more would stay and burn.

Grover shuddered. “If *half* the stuff I’ve heard about Caligula is true…”

He paused, apparently realizing that everyone was watching him, gauging how much they should panic based on Grover’s reactions. I, for one, did not want to be in the middle of a room filled with cacti that were running around screaming.

Fortunately, Grover kept his cool.

“Nobody is unbeatable,” he declared. “Not Titans, giants, or gods—and *definitely* not some Roman emperor named Booties. This guy is causing Southern California to wither and die. He’s behind the droughts, the heat, the fires. We *have* to find a way to stop him. Apollo, how did Caligula die the first time?”

I tried to remember. As usual, my mortal hard drive of a brain was shot full of holes, but I seemed to recall a dark tunnel packed with praetorian guards, crowding around the emperor, their knives flashing and glistening with blood.

“His own guards killed him,” I said, “which I’m sure has made him even more paranoid. Macro mentioned that the emperor kept changing his personal guard. First automatons replaced the praetors. Then he changed them again to mercenaries and strixes and…big ears? I don’t know what that means.”

One of the dryads huffed indignantly. I guessed she was Cholla, since she looked like a cholla plant—wispy white hair, a fuzzy white beard, and large paddle-shaped ears covered with bristles. “No decent big-eared person would work for such a villain! What about other weaknesses? The emperor must have some!”

“Yeah!” Coach Hedge chimed in. “Is he scared of goats?”

“Is he allergic to cactus sap?” Aloe Vera asked hopefully.

“Not that I know of,” I said.

The assembled dryads looked disappointed.

“You said you got a prophecy in Indiana?” Joshua asked. “Any clues there?”

His tone was skeptical, which I could understand. A *Hoosier prophecy* just doesn’t have the same ring to it as a *Delphic prophecy.*

“I have to find the *westward palace*,” I said. “Which must mean Caligula’s base.”

“No one knows where that is,” grumbled Pear.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but Mellie and Gleeson seemed to exchange an anxious look. I waited for them to say something else, but they did not.

“Also from the prophecy…” I continued. “I have to *wrest from him the crossword speaker’s breath*. Meaning, I think, that I have to free the Erythraean Sibyl from his control.”

“Does this Sibyl like crosswords?” Reba asked. “I like crosswords.”

“The Oracle gave her prophecies in the form of word puzzles,” I explained. “Like crosswords. Or acrostics. The prophecy also talks about Grover bringing us here, and a lot of terrible things that will happen at Camp Jupiter in the next few days—”

“The new moon,” Meg muttered. “Coming very soon.”

“Yes.” I tried to contain my annoyance. Meg seemed to want me to be in two places at once, which would have been no problem for Apollo the god. For Lester the human, I could barely manage being in one place at once.

“There’s another line,” Grover remembered. “*Walk the path in thine own enemy’s boots?* Could that have something to do with Caligula’s booties?”

I imagined my ginormous sixteen-year-old feet crammed into a Roman toddler’s military-issued leather baby shoes. My toes began to throb.

“I hope not,” I said. “But if we could free the Sibyl from the maze, I’m sure she would help us. I’d like to have more guidance before I charge off to confront Caligula in person.”

Other things I would have liked: my godly powers back, the entire firearms department of Macro’s Military Madness locked and loaded in the hands of a demigod army, an apology letter from my father, Zeus, promising never again to turn me into a human, and a bath. But, as they say, Lesters can’t be choosers.

“That brings us back to where we started,” Joshua said. “You need the Oracle freed. We need the fires shut off. To do that, we need to get through the maze, but nobody knows how.”

Gleeson Hedge cleared his throat. “Maybe somebody does.”

Never before had so many cacti stared at a satyr.

Cholla stroked her wispy white beard. “Who is this somebody?”

Hedge turned to his wife, as if to say *All you, sweetie.*

Mellie spent a few more microseconds pondering the night sky, and possibly her former life as a nebulous bachelorette.

“Most of you know we’ve been living with the McLeans,” she said.

“As in Piper McLean,” I explained, “daughter of Aphrodite.”

I remembered her—one of the seven demigods who had sailed aboard the *Argo II*. In fact, I’d been hoping to call on her and her boyfriend, Jason Grace, while I was in Southern California, to see if they would defeat the emperor and free the Oracle for me.

Wait. Scratch that. I meant, of course, that I hoped they would *help me* do those things.

Mellie nodded. “I was Mr. McLean’s personal assistant. Gleeson was a full-time stay-at-home father, doing a great job—”

“I was, wasn’t I?” Gleeson agreed, giving Baby Chuck the chain of his nunchaku to teethe on.

“Until everything went wrong,” Mellie said with a sigh.

Meg McCaffrey tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Long story,” said the cloud nymph, in a tone that implied *I could tell you, but then I’d have to turn into a storm cloud and cry a lot and zap you with lightning and kill you*. “The point is, a couple of weeks ago, Piper had a

dream about the Burning Maze. She thought she'd found a way to reach the center. She went exploring with…that boy, Jason."

That boy. My finely tuned senses told me Mellie was not happy with Jason Grace, son of Jupiter.

"When they came back…" Mellie paused, her lower half swirling in a corkscrew of cloud stuff. "They said they had failed. But I don't think that's the whole story. Piper hinted that they had encountered something down there that…rattled them."

The stone walls of the Cistern seemed to creak and shift in the cooling night air, as if sympathetically vibrating with the word *rattled*. I thought of my dream about the Sibyl in fiery chains, apologizing to someone after delivering terrible news: *I am sorry. I would spare you if I could. I would spare her.*

Had she been addressing Jason, or Piper, or both of them? If so, and if they had actually found the Oracle…

"We need to talk to those demigods," I decided.

Mellie lowered her head. "I can't take you. Going back…it would break my heart."

Hedge shifted Baby Chuck to his other arm. "Maybe I could—"

Mellie shot him a warning look.

"Yeah, I can't go either," Hedge muttered.

"I'll take you," Grover volunteered, though he looked more exhausted than ever. "I know where the McLean house is. Just, uh, maybe we can wait until the morning?"

A sense of relief washed over the assembled dryads. Their spikes relaxed. The chlorophyll came back into their complexions. Grover may not have solved their problems, but he had given them hope—at the very least, a sense that we could *do* something.

I gazed at the circle of hazy orange sky above the Cistern. I thought about the fires blazing to the west, and what might be going on up north at Camp Jupiter. Sitting at the bottom of a shaft in Palm Springs, unable to help the Roman demigods or even know what was happening to them, I could empathize with the dryads—rooted in place, watching in despair as the wildfires got closer and closer.

I didn't want to quash the dryads' newfound hopes, but I felt compelled to say, "There's more. Your sanctuary might not be safe for much longer."

I told them what Incitatus had said to Caligula on the phone. And no, I never thought I would be reporting on an eavesdropped conversation between a talking horse and a dead Roman emperor.

Aloe Vera trembled, shaking several highly medicinal triangle spikes from her hair. "H-how could they know about Aeithales? They've never bothered us here!"

Grover winced. “I don’t know, guys. But…the horse did seem to imply that Caligula was the one who had destroyed it years ago. He said something like *I know you think you took care of it. But that place is still dangerous*.”

Joshua’s bark-brown face turned even darker. “Doesn’t make sense. Even *we* don’t know what this place was.”

“A house,” Meg said. “A big house on stilts. These cisterns…they were support columns, geothermal cooling, water supply.”

The dryads bristled all over again. They said nothing, waiting for Meg to continue.

She drew in her wet feet, making her look even more like a nervous squirrel ready to spring away. I remembered how she’d wanted to leave here as soon as we arrived, how she’d warned it wasn’t safe. I recalled one line of the prophecy we hadn’t yet discussed: *Demeter’s daughter finds her ancient roots*.

“Meg,” I said, as gently as I could, “how do you know this place?”

Her expression turned tense but defiant, as if she wasn’t sure whether to burst into tears or fight me.

“Because it was my home,” she said. “My dad built Aeithales.”

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11

No touchy the god
Unless your visions are good
And you wash your hands

YOU don’t do that.

You don’t just announce that your dad built a mysterious house on a sacred spot for dryads, then get up and leave without an explanation.

So of course, that’s what Meg did.

“See you in the morning,” she announced to no one in particular.

She trudged up the ramp, still barefoot despite traipsing past twenty different species of cactus, and slipped into the dark.

Grover looked around at his assembled comrades. “Um, well, good meeting, everybody.”

He promptly fell over, snoring before he hit the ground.

Aloe Vera gave me a concerned glance. “Should I go after Meg? She might need more aloe goo.”

“I’ll check on her,” I promised.

The nature spirits began cleaning up their dinner trash (dryads are very conscientious about that sort of thing), while I went in search of Meg McCaffrey.

I found her five feet off the ground, perched on the rim of the farthest brick cylinder, facing inward and staring into the shaft below. Judging from the warm strawberry fragrance wafting from the cracks in the stone, I guessed this was the same well we’d used to exit the Labyrinth.

“You’re making me nervous,” I said. “Would you come down?”

“No,” she said.

“Of course not,” I muttered.

I climbed up, despite the fact that scaling walls really wasn’t in my skill set. (Oh, who am I kidding? In my present state, I didn’t *have* a skill set.)

I joined Meg on the edge, dangling my feet over the abyss from which we'd escaped….Had it really been only this morning? I couldn't see the net of strawberry plants below in the shadows, but their smell was powerful and exotic in the desert setting. Strange how a common thing can become uncommon in a new environment. Or in my case, how an uncommonly amazing god can become so very common.

The night sapped the color from Meg's clothes, making her look like a grayscale stoplight. Her runny nose glistened. Behind the grimy lenses of her glasses, her eyes were wet. She twisted one gold ring, then the other, as if adjusting knobs on an old-fashioned radio.

We'd had a long day. The silence between us felt comfortable, and I wasn't sure I could tolerate any further scary information about our Hoosier prophecy. On the other hand, I needed explanations. Before I went to sleep in this place again, I wanted to know how safe or unsafe it was, and whether I might wake up with a talking horse in my face.

My nerves were shot. I considered throttling my young master and yelling *TELL ME NOW!*, but I decided that might not be sensitive to her feelings.

"Would you like to talk about it?" I asked gently.

"No."

Not a huge surprise. Even under the best of circumstances, Meg and conversation were awkward acquaintances.

"If Aeithales is the place mentioned in the prophecy," I said, "your ancient roots, then it might be important to know about it so…we can stay alive?"

Meg looked over. She didn't order me to leap into the strawberry pit, or even to shut up. Instead, she said, "Here," and grabbed my wrist.

I had become used to waking visions—being yanked backward down memory lane whenever godly experiences overloaded my mortal neurons. This was different. Rather than my own past, I found myself plunged into Meg McCaffrey's, seeing her memories from her point of view.

I stood in one of the greenhouses before the plants grew wild. Well-ordered rows of new cactus pups lined the metal shelves, each clay pot fitted with a digital thermometer and moisture gauge. Misting hoses and grow lights hovered overhead. The air was warm, but pleasantly so, and smelled of freshly turned earth.

Wet gravel crunched under my feet as I followed my father on his rounds —*Meg's* father, I mean.

From my vantage point as a tiny girl, I saw him smiling down at me. As Apollo I'd met him before in other visions—a middle-aged man with dark curly hair and a broad, freckled nose. I'd witnessed him in New York, giving Meg a red rose from her mother, Demeter. I'd also seen his dead body splayed on the steps of Grand Central Station, his chest a ruin of knife or claw marks, on the day Nero became Meg's stepfather.

In this memory of the greenhouse, Mr. McCaffrey didn't look much younger than in those other visions. The emotions I sensed from Meg told me she was about five years old, the same age she'd been when she and her father wound up in New York. But Mr. McCaffrey looked so much happier in this scene, so much more at ease. As Meg gazed into her father's face, I was overwhelmed by her pure joy and contentment. She was with Daddy. Life was wonderful.

Mr. McCaffrey's green eyes sparkled. He picked up a potted cactus pup and knelt to show Meg. "I call this one Hercules," he said, "because he can withstand *anything*!"

He flexed his arm and said, "GRRRR!" which sent little Meg into a fit of giggles.

"Er-klees!" she said. "Show me more plants!"

Mr. McCaffrey set Hercules back on the shelf, then held up one finger like a magician: *Watch this!* He dug into the pocket of his denim shirt and presented his cupped fist to Meg.

"Try to open it," he said.

Meg pulled at his fingers. "I can't!"

"You can. You're very strong. Try *really* hard!"

"GRRR!" said little Meg. This time she managed to open his hand, revealing seven hexagonal seeds, each the size of a nickel. Inside their thick green skins, the seeds glowed faintly, making them look like a fleet of tiny UFOs.

"Ooh," said Meg. "Can I eat them?"

Her father laughed. "No, sweetheart. These are very special seeds. Our family has been trying to produce seeds like this for"—he whistled softly—"a *long* time. And when we plant them…"

"What?" Meg asked breathlessly.

"They will be very special," her dad promised. "Even stronger than Hercules!"

"Plant them now!"

Her father ruffled her hair. "Not yet, Meg. They're not ready. But when it's time, I'll need your help. We'll plant them together. Will you promise to help me?"

"I promise," she said, with all the solemnity of her five-year-old heart.

The scene shifted. Meg padded barefoot into the beautiful living room of Aeithales, where her father stood facing a wall of curved glass, overlooking the nighttime city lights of Palm Springs. He was talking on the phone, his back to Meg. She was supposed to be asleep, but something had woken her—maybe a bad dream, maybe the sense that Daddy was upset.

"No, I *don't* understand," he was saying into the phone. "You have no right. This property isn't…Yes, but my research can't…That's impossible!"

Meg crept forward. She loved being in the living room. Not just for the pretty view, but for the way the polished hardwood felt against her bare feet—smooth and cool and silky, like she was gliding across a living sheet of ice. She loved the plants Daddy kept on the shelves and in giant pots all around the room—cacti blooming in dozens of colors, Joshua trees that formed living columns, holding up the roof, growing *into* the ceiling and spreading across it in a web of fuzzy branches and green spiky clusters. Meg was too young to understand that Joshua trees weren't supposed to do that. It seemed completely reasonable to her that vegetation would weave together to help form the house.

Meg also loved the big circular well in the center of the room—the Cistern, Daddy called it—railed off for safety, but so wonderful for how it cooled the whole house and made the place feel safe and anchored. Meg loved to race down the ramp and dip her feet in the cool water of the pool at the bottom, though Daddy always said, *Don't soak too long! You might turn into a plant!*

Most of all, she loved the big desk where Daddy worked—the trunk of a mesquite tree that grew straight up through the floor and plunged back down again, like the coil of a sea serpent breaching the waves, leaving just enough of an arc to form the piece of furniture. The top of the trunk was smooth and level, a perfect work surface. Tree hollows provided cubbyholes for storage. Leafy sprigs curved up from the desktop, making a frame to hold Daddy's computer monitor. Meg had once asked if he'd hurt the tree when he carved the desk out of it, but Daddy had chuckled.

"No, sweetheart, I would never hurt the tree. Mesquite offered to shape herself into a desk *for* me."

This, too, did not seem unusual to five-year-old Meg—calling a tree *she*, talking to it the way you would speak to a person.

Tonight, though, Meg didn't feel so comfortable in the living room. She didn't like the way Daddy's voice was shaking. She reached his desk and found, instead of the usual seed packets and drawings and flowers, a stack of mail—typed letters, thick stapled documents, envelopes—all in dandelion yellow.

Meg couldn't read, but she didn't like those letters. They looked important and bossy and angry. The color hurt her eyes. It wasn't as nice as real dandelions.

"You don't understand," Daddy said into the phone. "This is more than my life's work. It's centuries. *Thousands* of years' work…I don't care if that sounds crazy. You can't just—"

He turned and froze, seeing Meg at his desk. A spasm crossed his face—his expression shifting from anger to fear to concern, then settling into a

forced cheerfulness. He slipped his phone into his pocket.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, his voice stretched thin. "Couldn't sleep, huh? Yeah, me neither."

He walked to the desk, swept the dandelion-yellow papers into a tree hollow, and offered Meg his hand. "Want to check the greenhouses?"

The scene changed again.

A jumbled, fragmentary memory: Meg was wearing her favorite outfit, a green dress and yellow leggings. She liked it because Daddy said it made her look like one of their greenhouse friends—a beautiful, growing thing. She stumbled down the driveway in the dark, following Daddy, her backpack stuffed with her favorite blanket because Daddy said they had to hurry. They could only take what they could carry.

They were halfway to the car when Meg stopped, noticing that the lights were on in the greenhouses.

"Meg," her father said, his voice as broken as the gravel under their feet. "Come on, sweetheart."

"But Er-klees," she said. "And the others."

"We can't bring them," Daddy said, swallowing back a sob.

Meg had never heard her father cry before. It made her feel like the earth was dropping out from underneath her.

"The magic seeds?" she asked. "We can plant them—where we're going?"

The idea of going somewhere else seemed impossible, scary. She'd never known any home but Aeithales.

"We can't, Meg." Daddy sounded like he could barely talk. "They have to grow *here*. And now…"

He looked back at the house, floating on its massive stone supports, its windows ablaze with gold light. But something was wrong. Dark shapes moved across the hillside—men, or something like men, dressed in black, encircling the property. And more dark shapes swirling overhead, wings blotting out the stars.

Daddy grabbed her hand. "No time, sweetheart. We have to leave. Now."

Meg's last memory of Aeithales: She sat in the back of her father's station wagon, her face and hands pressed against the rear window, trying to keep the lights of the house in view as long as possible. They'd driven only halfway down the hill when their home erupted in a blossom of fire.

I gasped, my senses suddenly yanked back to the present. Meg removed her hand from my wrist.

I stared at her in amazement, my sense of reality wobbling so much I was afraid I might fall into the strawberry pit. "Meg, how did you…?"

She picked at a callus on her palm. “Dunno. Just needed to.”

Such a very *Meg* answer. Still, the memories had been so painful and vivid they made my chest hurt, as if I’d been hit with a defibrillator.

How had Meg shared her past with me? I knew satyrs could create an empathy link with their closest friends. Grover Underwood had one with Percy Jackson, which he said explained why he sometimes got an inexplicable craving for blueberry pancakes. Did Meg have a similar talent, perhaps because we were linked as master and servant?

I didn’t know.

I *did* know that Meg was hurting, much more than she expressed. The tragedies of her short life had started before her father’s death. They had started here. These ruins were all that remained of a life that could have been.

I wanted to hug her. And believe me, that was not a feeling I had often. It was liable to result in an elbow to my rib cage or a sword hilt to my nose.

“Did you…?” I faltered. “Did you have these memories all along? Do you know what your father was trying to do here?”

A listless shrug. She grabbed a handful of dust and trickled it into the pit as if sowing seeds.

“Phillip,” Meg said, as if the name had just occurred to her. “My dad’s name was Phillip McCaffrey.”

The name made me think of the Macedonian king, father of Alexander. A good fighter, but *no* fun at all. Never any interest in music or poetry or even archery. With Philip it was all phalanxes, all the time. *Boring.*

“Phillip McCaffrey was a very good father,” I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. I myself did not have much experience with good fathers.

“He smelled like mulch,” Meg remembered. “In a good way.”

I didn’t know the difference between a good mulch smell and a bad mulch smell, but I nodded respectfully.

I gazed at the row of greenhouses—their silhouettes barely visible against the red-black night sky. Phillip McCaffrey had obviously been a talented man. Perhaps a botanist? Definitely a mortal favored by the goddess Demeter. How else could he have created a house like Aeithales, in a place with such natural power? What had he been working on, and what had he meant when he said his family had been doing the same research for thousands of years? Humans rarely thought in terms of millennia. They were lucky if they even knew the names of their great-grandparents.

Most important, what had happened to Aeithales, and why? Who had driven the McCaffreys from their home and forced them east to New York? That last question, unfortunately, was the only one I felt I could answer.

“Caligula did this,” I said, gesturing at the ruined cylinders on the hillside. “That’s what Incitatus meant when he said the emperor took care of this

place.”

Meg turned toward me, her face like stone. “We’re going to find out. Tomorrow. You, me, Grover. We’ll find these people, Piper and Jason.”

Arrows rattled in my quiver, but I couldn’t be sure if it was the Arrow of Dodona buzzing for attention, or my own body trembling. “And if Piper and Jason don’t know anything helpful?”

Meg brushed the dust from her hands. “They’re part of the seven, right? Percy Jackson’s friends?”

“Well…yes.”

“Then they’ll know. They’ll help. We’ll find Caligula. We’ll explore this mazy place and free the Sibyl and stop the fires and whatever.”

I admired her ability to summarize our quest in such eloquent terms.

On the other hand, I was not excited about exploring the mazy place, even if we had the help of two more powerful demigods. Ancient Rome had had powerful demigods too. Many of them tried to overthrow Caligula. All of them had died.

I kept coming back to my vision of the Sibyl, apologizing for her terrible news. Since when did an Oracle *apologize*?

I would spare you if I could. I would spare her.

The Sibyl had insisted I come to her rescue. Only I could free her, though it was a trap.

I never liked traps. They reminded me of my old crush Britomartis. Ugh, the number of Burmese tiger pits I’d fallen into for the sake of that goddess.

Meg swung her legs around. “I’m going to sleep. You should too.”

She hopped off the wall and picked her way across the hillside, heading back toward the Cistern. Since she had not actually ordered me to go to sleep, I stayed on the ledge for a long time, staring down into the strawberry-clogged chasm below, listening for the fluttering wings of ill omen.

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12

O, Pinto, Pinto!
Wherefore art thou puke yellow?
I'll hide in the back

GODS of Olympus, had I not suffered enough?

Driving from Palm Springs to Malibu with Meg and Grover would have been bad enough. Skirting wildfire evacuation zones and the LA morning rush hour made it worse. But did we *have* to make the journey in Gleeson Hedge's mustard-colored 1979 Ford Pinto coupe?

"Are you kidding?" I asked when I found my friends waiting with Gleeson at the car. "Don't any of the cacti own a better—I mean another vehicle?"

Coach Hedge glowered. "Hey, buddy, you should be grateful. This is a classic! Belonged to my granddaddy goat. I've kept it in *great* shape, so don't you guys *dare* wreck it."

I thought about my most recent experiences with cars: the sun chariot crashing nose-first into the lake at Camp Half-Blood; Percy Jackson's Prius getting wedged between two peach trees in a Long Island orchard; a stolen Mercedes swerving through the streets of Indianapolis, driven by a trio of demon fruit spirits.

"We'll take good care of it," I promised.

Coach Hedge conferred with Grover, making sure he knew how to find the McLean house in Malibu.

"The McLeans should still be there," Hedge mused. "At least, I hope so."

"What do you mean?" Grover asked. "Why would they *not* be there?"

Hedge coughed. "Anyway, good luck! Give Piper my best if you see her. Poor kid…."

He turned and trotted back up the hill.

The inside of the Pinto smelled like hot polyester and patchouli, which

brought back bad memories of disco-dancing with Travolta. (Fun fact: In Italian, his surname means *overwhelmed*, which perfectly describes what his cologne does.)

Grover took the wheel, since Gleeson trusted only him with the keys. (Rude.)

Meg rode shotgun, her red sneakers propped on the dashboard as she amused herself by growing bougainvillea vines around her ankles. She seemed in good spirits, considering last night's share session of childhood tragedy. That made one of us. I could barely think about the losses she'd suffered without blinking back tears.

Luckily, I had lots of room to cry in privacy, since I was stuck in the backseat.

We started west on Interstate 10. As we passed by Moreno Valley, it took me a while to realize what was wrong: rather than slowly changing to green, the landscape remained brown, the temperature oppressive, and the air dry and sour, as if the Mojave Desert had forgotten its boundaries and spread all the way to Riverside. To the north, the sky was a soupy haze, like the entire San Bernardino Forest was on fire.

By the time we reached Pomona and hit bumper-to-bumper traffic, our Pinto was shuddering and wheezing like a warthog with heatstroke.

Grover glanced in the rearview mirror at a BMW riding our tail.

"Don't Pintos explode if they're hit from behind?" he asked.

"Only sometimes," I said.

Back in my sun-chariot days, riding a vehicle that burst into flames was never something that bothered me, but after Grover brought it up, I kept looking behind me, mentally willing the BMW to back off.

I was in desperate need of breakfast—not just cold leftovers from last night's enchilada run. I would've smote a Greek city for a good cup of coffee and perhaps a nice long drive in the opposite direction from where we were going.

My mind began to drift. I didn't know if I was having actual waking dreams, shaken loose by my visions the day before, or if my consciousness was trying to escape the backseat of the Pinto, but I found myself reliving memories of the Erythraean Sibyl.

I remembered her name now: Herophile, *friend of heroes.*

I saw her homeland, the Bay of Erythrae, on the coast of what would someday be Turkey. A crescent of windswept golden hills, studded with conifers, undulated down to the cold blue waters of the Aegean. In a small glen near the mouth of a cave, a shepherd in homespun wool knelt beside his wife, the naiad of a nearby spring, as she gave birth to their child. I will spare you the details, except for this: as the mother screamed in her final push, the child emerged from the womb not crying but *singing*—her beautiful voice

filling the air with the sound of prophecies.

As you can imagine, that got my attention. From that moment on, the girl was sacred to Apollo. I blessed her as one of my Oracles.

I remembered Herophile as a young woman wandering the Mediterranean to share her wisdom. She sang to anyone who would listen—kings, heroes, priests of my temples. All struggled to transcribe her prophetic lyrics. Imagine having to commit the entire songbook of *Hamilton* to memory in a single sitting, without the ability to rewind, and you can appreciate their problem.

Herophile simply had too much good advice to share. Her voice was so enchanting, it was impossible for listeners to catch every detail. She couldn't control what she sang or when. She never repeated herself. You just had to be there.

She predicted the fall of Troy. She foresaw the rise of Alexander the Great. She advised Aeneas on where he should establish the colony that would one day become Rome. But did the Romans listen to all her advice, like *Watch out for emperors, Don't go crazy with the gladiator stuff,* or *Togas are not a good fashion statement*? No. No, they didn't.

For nine hundred years, Herophile roamed the earth. She did her best to help, but despite my blessings and occasional deliveries of pick-me-up flower arrangements, she became discouraged. Everyone she'd known in her youth was dead. She'd seen civilizations rise and fall. She'd heard too many priests and heroes say *Wait, what? Could you repeat that? Let me get a pencil.*

She returned home to her mother's hillside in Erythrae. The spring had dried up centuries before, and with it her mother's spirit, but Herophile settled in the nearby cave. She helped supplicants whenever they came to seek her wisdom, but her voice was never the same.

Gone was her beautiful singing. Whether she'd lost her confidence, or whether the gift of prophecy had simply changed into a different sort of curse, I couldn't be sure. Herophile spoke haltingly, leaving out important words that the listener would have to guess. Sometimes her voice failed altogether. In frustration, she scribbled lines on dried leaves, leaving them for the supplicant to arrange in the proper order to find meaning.

The last time I saw Herophile…yes, the year was 1509 CE. I'd coaxed her out of her cave for one last visit to Rome, where Michelangelo was painting her portrait on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Apparently, she was being celebrated for some obscure prophecy long ago, when she'd predicted the birth of Jesus the Nazarene.

"I don't know, Michael," Herophile said, sitting next to him on his scaffold, watching him paint. "It's beautiful, but my arms are not that…" Her voice seized up. "Eight letters, starts with *M*."

Michelangelo tapped his paintbrush to his lips. "Muscular?"

Herophile nodded vigorously.

“I can fix that,” Michelangelo promised.

Afterward, Herophile returned to her cave for good. I’ll admit I lost track of her. I assumed she had faded away, like so many other ancient Oracles. Yet now here she was, in Southern California, at the mercy of Caligula.

I really should have kept sending those floral arrangements.

Now, all I could do was try to make up for my negligence. Herophile was *still* my Oracle, as much as Rachel Dare at Camp Half-Blood, or the ghost of poor Trophonius in Indianapolis. Whether it was a trap or not, I couldn’t leave her in a chamber of lava, shackled with molten manacles. I began to wonder if maybe, just maybe, Zeus had been *right* to send me to earth, to correct the wrongs I had allowed to happen.

I quickly shoved that thought aside. No. This punishment was entirely unfair. Still, ugh. Is anything worse than realizing you might agree with your father?

Grover navigated around the northern edge of Los Angeles, through traffic that moved almost as slowly as Athena’s brainstorming process.

I don’t wish to be unfair to Southern California. When the place was not on fire, or trapped in a brown haze of smog, or rumbling with earthquakes, or sliding into the sea, or choked with traffic, there were things I liked about it: the music scene, the palm trees, the beaches, the nice days, the pretty people. Yet I understood why Hades had located the main entrance to the Underworld here. Los Angeles was a magnet for human aspirations—the perfect place for mortals to gather, starry-eyed with dreams of fame, then fail, die, and circle down the drain, flushed into oblivion.

There, you see? I can be a balanced observer!

Every so often I looked skyward, hoping to see Leo Valdez flying overhead on his bronze dragon, Festus. I wanted him to be carrying a large banner that said EVERYTHING’S COOL! The new moon wasn’t for two more days, true, but maybe Leo had finished his rescue mission early! He could land on the highway, tell us that Camp Jupiter had been saved from whatever threat had faced them. Then he could ask Festus to blowtorch the cars in front of us to speed up our travels.

Alas, no bronze dragon circled above, though it would’ve been hard to spot. The entire sky was bronze colored.

“So, Grover,” I said, after a few decades on the Pacific Coast Highway, “have you ever *met* Piper or Jason?”

Grover shook his head. “Seems strange, I know. We’ve all been in SoCal for so long. But I’ve been busy with the fires. Jason and Piper have been questing and going to school and whatever. I just never got the chance. Coach says they’re…nice.”

I got the feeling he’d been about to say something other than *nice*.

“Is there a problem we should know about?” I asked.

Grover drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Well…they’ve been under a lot of stress. First, they were looking for Leo Valdez. Then they did some other quests. Then things started to go bad for Mr. McLean.”

Meg glanced up from braiding a bougainvillea. “Piper’s dad?”

Grover nodded. “He’s a famous actor, you know. Tristan McLean?”

A frisson of pleasure went up my back. I loved Tristan McLean in *King of Sparta*. And *Jake Steel 2: The Return of Steel*. For a mortal, that man had *endless* abs.

“How did things go badly?” I asked.

“You don’t read celebrity news,” Grover guessed.

Sad but true. With all my running around as a mortal, freeing ancient Oracles and fighting Roman megalomaniacs, I’d had zero time to keep up with juicy Hollywood gossip.

“Messy breakup?” I speculated. “Paternity suit? Did he say something horrible on Twitter?”

“Not exactly,” Grover said. “Let’s just…see how things are going when we get there. It might not be so bad.”

He said that in the way people do when they expect it to be *exactly* that bad.

By the time we made it to Malibu, it was nearly lunchtime. My stomach was turning itself inside out from hunger and car sickness. Me, who used to spend all day cruising in the sun Maserati, *carsick*. I blamed Grover. He drove with a heavy hoof.

On the bright side, our Pinto had not exploded, and we found the McLean house without incident.

Set back from the winding road, the mansion at 12 Oro del Mar clung to rocky cliffs overlooking the Pacific. From street level, the only visible parts were the white stucco security walls, the wrought-iron gates, and an expanse of red-clay-tiled roofs.

The place would have radiated a sense of privacy and Zen tranquility if not for the moving trucks parked outside. The gates stood wide open. Troops of burly men were carting away sofas, tables, and large works of art. Pacing back and forth at the end of the driveway, looking bedraggled and stunned, as if he’d just walked away from a car wreck, was Tristan McLean.

His hair was longer than I’d seen it in the films. Silky black locks swept across his shoulders. He’d put on weight, so he no longer resembled the sleek killing machine he’d been in *King of Sparta*. His white jeans were smeared with soot. His black T-shirt was torn at the collar. His loafers looked like a pair of overbaked potatoes.

It didn’t seem right, a celebrity of his caliber just standing in front of his Malibu house without any guards or personal assistants or adoring fans—not

even a mob of paparazzi to snap embarrassing pictures.

"What's wrong with him?" I wondered.

Meg squinted through the windshield. "He looks okay."

"No," I insisted. "He looks…*average*."

Grover turned off the engine. "Let's go say hi."

Mr. McLean stopped pacing when he saw us. His dark brown eyes seemed unfocused. "Are you Piper's friends?"

I couldn't find my words. I made a gurgling sound I hadn't produced since I first met Grace Kelly.

"Yes, sir," said Grover. "Is she home?"

"Home…" Tristan McLean tasted the word. He seemed to find it bitter and without meaning. "Go on inside." He waved vaguely down the driveway. "I think she's…" His voice trailed off as he watched two movers carting away a large marble statue of a catfish. "Go ahead. Doesn't matter."

I wasn't sure if he was talking to us or to the movers, but his defeated tone alarmed me even more than his appearance.

We made our way through a courtyard of sculpted gardens and sparkling fountains, through a double-wide entrance with polished oak doors, and into the house.

Red-Saltillo-tiled floors gleamed. Cream-white walls retained paler impressions where paintings had recently hung. To our right stretched a gourmet kitchen that even Edesia, the Roman goddess of banquets, would have adored. Before us spread a great room with a thirty-foot-high cedar-beamed ceiling, a massive fireplace, and a wall of sliding glass doors leading to a terrace with views of the ocean.

Sadly, the room was a hollowed-out shell: no furniture, no carpets, no artwork—just a few cables curling from the wall and a broom and dustpan leaning in one corner.

A room so impressive should not have been empty. It felt like a temple without statues, music, and gold offerings. (Oh, why did I torture myself with such analogies?)

Sitting on the fireplace surround, going through a stack of papers, was a young woman with coppery skin and layered dark hair. Her orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt led me to assume I was looking at Piper, daughter of Aphrodite and Tristan McLean.

Our footsteps echoed in the vast space, but Piper did not look up as we approached. Perhaps she was too engrossed in her papers, or she assumed we were movers.

"You want me to get up *again*?" she muttered. "Pretty sure the fireplace is staying here."

"Ahem," I said.

Piper glanced up. Her multicolored irises caught the light like smoky

prisms. She studied me as if not sure what she was looking at (oh, boy, did I know the feeling), then gave Meg the same confused once-over.

She fixed her eyes on Grover and her jaw dropped. “I—I know you,” she said. “From Annabeth’s photos. You’re Grover!”

She shot to her feet, her forgotten papers spilling across the Saltillo tiles. “What’s happened? Are Annabeth and Percy all right?”

Grover edged back, which was understandable given Piper’s intense expression.

“They’re fine!” he said. “At least, I assume they’re fine. I haven’t actually, um, seen them in a while, b-but I have an empathy link with Percy, so if he *wasn’t* fine, I think I’d know—”

“Apollo.” Meg knelt down. She picked up one of the fallen papers, her frown even more severe than Piper’s.

My stomach completed its turn inside out. Why had I not noticed the color of the documents sooner? All of the papers—envelopes, collated reports, business letters—were dandelion yellow.

“‘N.H. Financials,’” Meg read from the letterhead. “‘Division of Triumvirate—’”

“Hey!” Piper swiped the paper from her hand. “That’s private!” Then she faced me as if doing a mental rewind. “Wait. Did she just call you *Apollo*?”

“I’m afraid so.” I gave her an awkward bow. “Apollo, god of poetry, music, archery, and many other important things, at your service, though my learner’s permit reads Lester Papadopoulos.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Also, this is Meg McCaffrey,” I said. “Daughter of Demeter. She doesn’t mean to be nosy. It’s just that we’ve seen papers like these before.”

Piper’s gaze bounced from me to Meg to Grover. The satyr shrugged as if to say *Welcome to my nightmare*.

“You’re going to have to rewind,” Piper decided.

I did my best to give her the elevator-pitch summary: my fall to earth, my servitude to Meg, my two previous quests to free the Oracles of Dodona and Trophonius, my travels with Calypso and Leo Valdez….

“LEO?” Piper grabbed my arms so hard I feared she would leave bruises. “He’s *alive*?”

“Hurts,” I whimpered.

“Sorry.” She let go. “I need to know everything about Leo. Now.”

I did my best to comply, fearing that she might physically pull the information from my brain otherwise.

“That little fire-flicker,” she grumbled. “We search for months, and he just shows up at *camp*?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “There is a waiting list of people who would like to hit

him. We can fit you in sometime next fall. But right now, we need your help. We have to free a Sibyl from the emperor Caligula."

Piper's expression reminded me of a juggler's, trying to track fifteen different objects in the air at once.

"I knew it," she muttered. "I knew Jason wasn't telling me—"

Half a dozen movers suddenly lumbered through the front door, speaking in Russian.

Piper scowled. "Let's talk on the terrace," she said. "We can exchange bad news."

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13

Don't move the gas grill
Meg is still playing with it
We are so KA-BOOM

OH, the scenic ocean vista! Oh, the waves crashing against the cliffs below, and the gulls whirling overhead! Oh, the large, sweaty mover in a lounge chair, checking his texts!

The man looked up when we arrived on the terrace. He scowled, grudgingly got to his feet, and lumbered inside, leaving a mover-shaped perspiration stain on the fabric of the chair.

"If I still had my cornucopia," Piper said, "I'd shoot those guys with glazed hams."

My abdominal muscles twitched. I'd once been hit in the gut by a roasted boar shot from a cornucopia, when Demeter was especially angry with me… but that's another story.

Piper climbed the terrace fence and sat on top of it, facing us, her feet hooked around the rails. I supposed she'd perched there hundreds of times and no longer thought about the long drop. Far below, at the bottom of a zigzagging wooden stairway, a narrow strip of beach clung to the base of the cliffs. Waves crashed against jagged rocks. I decided not to join Piper on the railing. I wasn't afraid of heights, but I was definitely afraid of my own poor sense of balance.

Grover peered at the sweaty lounge chair—the only piece of furniture left on the deck—and opted to remain standing. Meg strolled over to a built-in stainless-steel gas grill and began playing with the knobs. I estimated we had about five minutes before she blew us all to bits.

"So." I leaned on the railing next to Piper. "You know of Caligula."

Her eyes shifted from green to brown, like tree bark aging. "I knew *someone* was behind our problems—the maze, the fires, this." She gestured through the glass doors at the empty mansion. "When we were closing the

Doors of Death, we fought a lot of villains who'd come back from the Underworld. Makes sense an evil Roman emperor would be behind Triumvirate Holdings."

I guessed Piper was about sixteen, the same age as…no, I couldn't say *the same age as me*. If I thought in those terms, I would have to compare her perfect complexion to my own acne-scarred face, her finely chiseled nose to my bulbous wad of cartilage, her softly curved physique to mine, which was also softly curved but in all the wrong ways. Then I would have to scream *I HATE YOU!*

So young, yet she had seen so many battles. She said *when we were closing the Doors of Death* the way her high school peers might say *when we were swimming at Kyle's house*.

"We knew there was a burning maze," she continued. "Gleeson and Mellie told us about that. They said the satyrs and dryads…" She gestured at Grover. "Well, it's no secret you guys have been having a bad time with the drought and fires. Then I had some dreams. You know."

Grover and I nodded. Even Meg looked over from her dangerous experiments with outdoor cooking equipment and grunted sympathetically. We all knew that demigods couldn't take a catnap without being plagued by omens and portents.

"Anyway," Piper continued, "I thought we could find the heart of this maze. I figured whoever was responsible for making our lives miserable would be there, and we could send him or her back to the Underworld."

"When you say *we*," Grover asked, "you mean you and—?"

"Jason. Yes."

Her voice dipped when she spoke his name, the same way mine did when I was forced to speak the names *Hyacinthus* or *Daphne*.

"Something happened between you," I deduced.

She picked an invisible speck from her jeans. "It's been a tough year."

You're telling me, I thought.

Meg activated one of the barbecue burners, which flared blue like a thruster engine. "You guys break up or what?"

Leave it to McCaffrey to be tactless about love with a child of Aphrodite, while simultaneously starting a fire in front of a satyr.

"Please don't play with that," Piper asked gently. "And, yes, we broke up."

Grover bleated, "Really? But I heard—I thought—"

"You thought what?" Piper's voice remained calm and even. "That we'd be together forever like Percy and Annabeth?" She stared into the empty house, not exactly as if she missed the old furniture, but as if she were imagining the space completely redone. "Things change. People change.

Jason and me—we started out oddly. Hera kind of messed with our heads, made us think we shared a past we didn't share."

"Ah," I said. "That sounds like Hera."

"We fought the war against Gaia. Then we spent months searching for Leo. Then we tried to settle into school, and the moment I actually had some time to breathe…" She hesitated, searching each of our faces as if realizing she was about to share the real reasons, the *deeper* reasons, with people she barely knew. I remembered how Mellie had called Piper *poor girl*, and the way the cloud nymph had said Jason's name with distaste.

"Anyway," Piper said, "things change. But we're fine. He's fine. I'm fine. At least…I *was*, until this started." She gestured at the great room, where the movers were now lugging a mattress toward the front door.

I decided it was time to confront the elephant in the room. Or rather, the elephant on the terrace. Or rather, the elephant that would have been on the terrace had the movers not hauled him away.

"What happened exactly?" I asked. "What's in all those dandelion-colored documents?"

"Like this one," Meg said, pulling from her gardening belt a folded letter she must have filched from the great room. For a child of Demeter, she had sticky fingers.

"Meg!" I said. "That's not yours."

I may have been a little sensitive about stealing other people's mail. Once Artemis rifled through my correspondence and found some juicy letters from Lucrezia Borgia that she teased me about for decades.

"N.H. Financials," Meg persisted. "Neos Helios. Caligula, right?"

Piper dug her fingernails in the wooden rail. "Just get rid of it. Please."

Meg dropped the letter into the flames.

Grover sighed. "I could have eaten that for you. It's better for the environment, and stationery tastes great."

That got a thin smile from Piper.

"The rest is all yours," she promised. "As for what they say, it's all legal, legal, blah-blah, financial, boring, legal. Bottom line, my dad is ruined." She raised an eyebrow at me. "You really haven't seen any of the gossip columns? The magazine covers?"

"That's what *I* asked," Grover said.

I made a mental note to visit the nearest grocery store checkout lane and stock up on reading material. "I am woefully behind," I admitted. "When did this all start?"

"I don't even know," Piper said. "Jane, my dad's former personal assistant—she was in on it. Also his financial manager. His accountant. His film agent. This company Triumvirate Holdings…" Piper spread her hands, like she was describing a natural disaster that could not have been foreseen. "They went to

a *lot* of trouble. They must have spent years and tens of millions of dollars to destroy everything my dad built—his credit, his assets, his reputation with the studios. All gone. When we hired Mellie…well, she was great. She was the first person to spot the trouble. She tried to help, but it was much too late. Now my dad is worse than broke. He's deeply in debt. He owes millions in taxes he didn't even know about. Best we can hope for is that he avoids jail time."

"That's horrible," I said.

And I meant it. The prospect of never seeing Tristan McLean's abs on the big screen again was a bitter disappointment, though I was too tactful to say this in front of his daughter.

"It's not like I can expect a lot of sympathy," Piper said. "You should see the kids at my school, smirking and talking about me behind my back. I mean, even more than usual. *Oh, boo-hoo. You lost all three of your houses.*"

"*Three* houses?" Meg asked.

I didn't see why that was surprising. Most minor deities and celebrities I knew had at least a dozen, but Piper's expression turned sheepish.

"I know it's ridiculous," she said. "They repo-ed ten cars. And the helicopter. They're foreclosing on this place at the end of the week and taking the airplane."

"You have an airplane." Meg nodded as if this at least made perfect sense. "Cool."

Piper sighed. "I don't care about the *stuff*, but the nice former park ranger who was our pilot is going to be out of a job. And Mellie and Gleeson had to leave. So did the house staff. Most of all…I'm worried about my dad."

I followed her gaze. Tristan McLean was now wandering through the great room, staring at blank walls. I liked him better as an action hero. The role of broken man didn't suit him.

"He's been healing," Piper said. "Last year, a giant kidnapped him."

I shuddered. Being captured by giants could truly scar a person. Ares had been kidnapped by two of them, millennia ago, and he was never the same. Before, he had been arrogant and annoying. Afterward, he was arrogant, annoying, and brittle.

"I'm surprised your father's mind is still in one piece," I said.

The corners of Piper's eyes tightened. "When we rescued him from the giant, we used a potion to wipe his memory. Aphrodite said it was the only thing we could do for him. But now…I mean, how much trauma can one person take?"

Grover removed his cap and stared at it mournfully. Perhaps he was thinking reverent thoughts, or perhaps he was just hungry. "What will you do now?"

"Our family still has property," Piper said, "outside Tahlequah, Oklahoma

—the original Cherokee allotment. End of the week, we're using our last flight on the airplane to go back home. This is one battle I guess your evil emperors won."

I didn't like the emperors being called *mine*. I didn't like the way Piper said *home*, as if she'd already accepted that she would live the rest of her life in Oklahoma. Nothing against Oklahoma, mind you. My pal Woody Guthrie hailed from Okemah. But mortals from Malibu typically didn't see it as an upgrade.

Also, the idea of Tristan and Piper being forced to move east reminded me of the visions Meg had shown me last night: she and her father being pushed out of their home by the same boring dandelion-colored legal blah-blah, fleeing their burning house, and winding up in New York. Out of Caligula's frying pan, into Nero's fire.

"We can't let Caligula win," I told Piper. "You're not the only demigod he's targeted."

She seemed to absorb those words. Then she faced Meg, as if truly seeing her for the first time. "You too?"

Meg turned off the gas burner. "Yeah. My dad."

"What happened?"

Meg shrugged. "Long time ago."

We waited, but Meg had decided to be Meg.

"My young friend is a girl of few words," I said. "But with her permission…?"

Meg did not order me to shut up or to jump off the terrace, so I recounted for Piper what I'd seen in McCaffrey's memories.

When I was done, Piper hopped down from the railing. She approached Meg, and before I could say *Watch out, she bites harder than a wild squirrel!* Piper wrapped her arms around the younger girl.

"I'm so sorry." Piper kissed the top of her head.

I waited nervously for Meg's golden scimitars to flash into her hands. Instead, after a moment of petrified surprise, Meg melted into Piper's hug. They stayed like that for a long time, Meg quivering, Piper holding her as if she were the demigod Comforter-in-Chief, her own troubles irrelevant next to Meg's.

Finally, with a sniffle/hiccup, Meg pulled away, wiping her nose. "Thanks."

Piper looked at me. "How long has Caligula been messing with demigods' lives?"

"Several thousand years," I said. "He and the other two emperors did not go back through the Doors of Death. They never really left the world of the living. They are basically minor gods. They've had millennia to build their secret empire, Triumvirate Holdings."

“So why us?” Piper said. “Why now?”

“In your case,” I said, “I can only guess Caligula wants you out of the way. If you are distracted by your father’s problems, you are no threat, especially if you’re in Oklahoma, far from Caligula’s territory. As for Meg and her dad…I don’t know. He was involved in some sort of work Caligula found threatening.”

“Something that would’ve helped the dryads,” Grover added. “It *had* to be, based on where he was working, those greenhouses. Caligula ruined a man of nature.”

Grover sounded as angry as I’d ever heard him. I doubted there was higher praise a satyr could give a human than calling him *a man of nature*.

Piper studied the waves on the horizon. “You think it’s all connected. Caligula is working up to something—pushing out anyone who threatens him, starting this Burning Maze, destroying the nature spirits.”

“And imprisoning the Oracle of Erythraea,” I said. “As a trap. For me.”

“But what does he want?” Grover demanded. “What’s his endgame?”

Those were excellent questions. With Caligula, however, you almost never wanted the answers. They would make you cry.

“I’d like to ask the Sibyl,” I said, “if anyone here knows how we might find her.”

Piper pressed her lips together. “Ah. *That’s* why you’re here.”

She looked at Meg, then at the gas grill, perhaps trying to decide what would be more dangerous—going on a quest with us, or remaining here with a bored child of Demeter.

“Let me get my weapons,” Piper said. “We’ll go for a ride.”

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14

Bedrossian Man
Bedrossian Man, runs as
Fast as . . . yoga pants

“DON’T judge,” Piper warned as she reemerged from her room.

I would not have dreamed of it.

Piper McLean looked fashionably ready for combat in her bright white Converses, distressed skinny jeans, leather belt, and orange camp tee. Braided down one side of her hair was a bright blue feather—a *harpy* feather, if I wasn’t mistaken.

Strapped to her belt was a triangular-bladed dagger like the kind Greek women used to wear—a *parazonium*. Hecuba, future queen of Troy, sported one back when we were dating. It was mostly ceremonial, as I recalled, but very sharp. (Hecuba had a bit of a temper.)

Hanging from the other side of Piper’s belt…Ah. I guessed *this* was the reason she felt self-conscious. Holstered to her thigh was a miniature quiver stocked with foot-long projectiles, their fletching made from fluffy thistles. Slung across her shoulder, along with a backpack, was a four-foot tube of river cane.

“A blowgun!” I cried. “I *love* blowguns!”

Not that I was an expert, mind you, but the blowgun *was* a missile weapon—elegant, difficult to master, and *very* sneaky. How could I not love it?

Meg scratched her neck. “Are blowguns Greeky?”

Piper laughed. “No, they’re not Greeky. But they are Cherokee-y. My Grandpa Tom made this one for me a long time ago. He was always trying to get me to practice.”

Grover’s goatee twitched as if trying to free itself from his chin, Houdini-style. “Blowguns are really difficult to use. My Uncle Ferdinand had one. How good are you?”

“Not the best,” Piper admitted. “Nowhere near as good as my cousin in Tahlequah; she’s a tribal champion. But I’ve been practicing. Last time Jason and I were in the maze”—she patted her quiver—“these came in handy. You’ll see.”

Grover managed to contain his excitement. I understood his concern. In a novice’s hands, a blowgun was more dangerous to allies than to enemies.

“And the dagger?” Grover asked. “Is that really—?”

“Katoptris,” Piper said proudly. “Belonged to Helen of Troy.”

I yelped. “You have Helen of Troy’s dagger? Where did you *find* it?”

Piper shrugged. “In a shed at camp.”

I felt like pulling out my hair. I remembered the day Helen had received that dagger as a wedding present. Such a *gorgeous* blade, held by the most beautiful woman ever to walk the earth. (No offense to the billions of other women out there who are also quite enchanting; I love you all.) And Piper had found this historically significant, well-crafted, powerful weapon in a *shed*?

Alas, time makes bric-a-brac of everything, no matter how important. I wondered if such a fate awaited me. In a thousand years, somebody might find me in a toolshed and say *Oh, look. Apollo, god of poetry. Maybe I can polish him up and use him.*

“Does the blade still show visions?” I asked.

“You know about that, huh?” Piper shook her head. “The visions stopped last summer. That wouldn’t have anything to do with you getting kicked out of Olympus, would it, Mr. God of Prophecy?”

Meg sniffed. “Most things are his fault.”

“Hey!” I said. “Er, moving right along, Piper, where exactly are you taking us? If all your cars have been repossessed, I’m afraid we’re stuck with Coach Hedge’s Pinto.”

Piper smirked. “I think we can do better than that. Follow me.”

She led us to the driveway, where Mr. McLean had resumed his duties as a dazed wanderer. He meandered around the drive, head bowed as if he were looking for a dropped coin. His hair stuck up in ragged rows where his fingers had raked through it.

On the tailgate of a nearby truck, the movers were taking their lunch break, casually eating off china plates that had no doubt been in the McLeans’ kitchen not long before.

Mr. McLean looked up at Piper. He seemed unconcerned by her knife and blowgun. “Going out?”

“Just for a while.” Piper kissed her father on the cheek. “I’ll be back tonight. Don’t let them take the sleeping bags, okay? You and I can camp out on the terrace. It’ll be fun.”

“All right.” He patted her arm absently. “Good luck…studying?”

“Yep,” Piper said. “Studying.”

You have to love the Mist. You can stroll out of your house heavily armed, in the company of a satyr, a demigod, and a flabby former Olympian, and thanks to the Mist's perception-bending magic, your mortal father assumes you're going to a study group. *That's right, Dad. We need to go over some math problems that involve the trajectory of blowgun darts against moving targets.*

Piper led us across the street to the nearest neighbor's house—a Frankenstein's mansion of Tuscan tiles, modern windows, and Victorian gables that screamed *I have too much money and not enough taste! HELP!*

In the wraparound driveway, a heavyset man in athleisure-wear was just getting out of his white Cadillac Escalade.

"Mr. Bedrossian!" Piper called.

The man jumped, facing Piper with a look of terror. Despite his workout shirt, his ill-advised yoga pants, and his flashy running shoes, he looked like he'd been more *leisurely* than *athletic.* He was neither sweaty nor out of breath. His thinning hair made a perfect brushstroke of black grease across his scalp. When he frowned, his features gravitated toward the center of his face as if circling the twin black holes of his nostrils.

"P-Piper," he stammered. "What do you—?"

"I would *love* to borrow the Escalade, thank you!" Piper beamed.

"Uh, actually, this isn't—"

"This isn't a problem?" Piper supplied. "And you'd be delighted to lend it to me for the day? Fantastic!"

Bedrossian's face convulsed. He forced out the words, "Yes. Of course."

"Keys, please?"

Mr. Bedrossian tossed her the fob, then ran into his house as fast as his tight-fitting yoga pants would allow.

Meg whistled under her breath. "That was cool."

"What *was* that?" Grover asked.

"That," I said, "was charmspeaking." I reappraised Piper McLean, not sure if I should be impressed or if I should run after Mr. Bedrossian in a panic. "A rare gift among Aphrodite's children. Do you borrow Mr. Bedrossian's car a lot?"

Piper shrugged. "He's been an *awful* neighbor. He also has a dozen other cars. Believe me, we're not causing him any hardship. Besides, I usually bring back what I borrow. Usually. Shall we go? Apollo, you can drive."

"But—"

She smiled that sweetly scary *I-could-make-you-do-it* smile.

"I'll drive," I said.

We took the scenic coastal road south in the Bedrossian-mobile. Since the

Escalade was only slightly smaller than Hephaestus's fire-breathing hydra tank, I had to be careful to avoid sideswiping motorcycles, mailboxes, small children on tricycles, and other annoying obstacles.

"Are we going to pick up Jason?" I asked.

Next to me in the passenger's seat, Piper loaded a dart into her blowgun. "No need. Besides, he's in school."

"*You're* not."

"I'm moving, remember? As of next Monday, I'm enrolled at Tahlequah High." She raised her blowgun like a champagne glass. "Go, Tigers."

Her words sounded strangely unironic. Again, I wondered how she could be so resigned to her fate, so ready to let Caligula expel her and her father from the life they had built here. But since she had a loaded weapon in her hand, I didn't challenge her.

Meg's head popped up between our seats. "We won't need your ex-boyfriend?"

I swerved and almost ran over someone's grandmother.

"Meg!" I chided. "Sit back and buckle up, please. Grover—" I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the satyr chewing on a strip of gray fabric. "Grover, stop eating your seat belt. You're setting a bad example."

He spat out the strap. "Sorry."

Piper ruffled Meg's hair, then playfully pushed her into the backseat. "To answer your question, no. We'll be fine without Jason. I can show you the way into the maze. It was my dream, after all. This entrance is the one the emperor uses, so it *should* be the straightest shot to the center, where he's keeping your Sibyl."

"And when you went inside before," I said, "what happened?"

Piper shrugged. "The usual Labyrinth stuff—traps, changing corridors. Also some strange creatures. Guards. Hard to describe. And fire. Lots of that."

I remembered my vision of Herophile, raising her chained arms in the room of lava, apologizing to someone who wasn't me.

"You didn't actually find the Oracle?" I asked.

Piper was silent for half a block, gazing at flashes of ocean vista between houses. "I didn't. But there was a short time when we got separated, Jason and me. Now…I'm wondering if he told me everything that happened to him. I'm pretty sure he didn't."

Grover refastened his mangled seat belt. "Why would he lie?"

"That," Piper said, "is a very good question and a good reason to go back there without him. To see for myself."

I had a sense that Piper was holding back quite a bit herself—doubts, guesses, personal feelings, maybe what had happened to *her* in the Labyrinth.

Hooray, I thought. Nothing spices up a dangerous quest like personal

drama between formerly romantically involved heroes who may or may not be telling each other (and me) the whole truth.

Piper directed me into downtown Los Angeles.

I considered this a bad sign. “Downtown Los Angeles” had always struck me as an oxymoron, like “hot ice cream” or “military intelligence.” (Yes, Ares, that was an insult.)

Los Angeles was all about sprawl and suburbs. It wasn’t meant to have a downtown, any more than pizza was meant to have mango chunks. Oh, sure, here and there among the dull gray government buildings and closed-up storefronts, parts of downtown had been revitalized. As we zigzagged through the surface streets, I spotted plenty of new condos, hip stores, and swanky hotels. But to me, all those efforts seemed about as effective as putting makeup on a Roman legionnaire. (And believe me, I’d tried.)

We pulled over near Grand Park, which was neither grand nor much of a park. Across the street rose an eight-story honeycomb of concrete and glass. I seemed to recall going there once, decades before, to register my divorce from Greta Garbo. Or was it Liz Taylor? I couldn’t recall.

“The Hall of Records?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Piper said. “But we’re not going inside. Just park in the fifteen-minute loading zone over there.”

Grover leaned forward. “What if we’re not back in fifteen minutes?”

Piper smiled. “Then I’m sure the towing company will take good care of Mr. Bedrossian’s Escalade.”

Once on foot, we followed Piper to the side of the government complex, where she put her finger to her lips for quiet, then motioned for us to peek around the corner.

Running the length of the block was a twenty-foot-high concrete wall, punctuated by unremarkable metal doors that I assumed were service entrances. In front of one of those doors, about halfway down the block, stood a strange-looking guard.

Despite the warm day, he wore a black suit and tie. He was squat and burly, with unusually large hands. Wrapped around his head was something I couldn’t quite figure out, like an extra-large Arabic kaffiyeh made of white fuzzy terrycloth, which draped across his shoulders and hung halfway down his back. That alone might not have been so strange. He could have been a private security guard working for some Saudi oil tycoon. But why was he standing in an alley next to a nondescript metal door? And why was his face entirely covered in white fur—fur that exactly matched his headdress?

Grover sniffed the air, then pulled us back around the corner.

“That guy isn’t human,” he whispered.

“Give the satyr a prize,” Piper whispered back, though I wasn’t sure why we were being so quiet. We were half a block away, and there was plenty of

street noise.

"What is he?" Meg asked.

Piper checked the dart in her blowgun. "That's a good question. But they can be *real* trouble if you don't take them by surprise."

"They?" I asked.

"Yeah." Piper frowned. "Last time, there were two. And they had black fur. Not sure how this one is different. But that door is the entrance to the maze, so we need to take him out."

"Should I use my swords?" Meg asked.

"Only if I miss." Piper took a few deep breaths. "Ready?"

I didn't imagine she would accept *no* as an answer, so I nodded along with Grover and Meg.

Piper stepped out, raised her blowgun, and fired.

It was a fifty-foot shot, at the edge of what I consider practical blowgun range, but Piper hit her target. The dart pierced the man's left trouser leg.

The guard looked down at the strange new accoutrement protruding from his thigh. The shaft's fletching matched his white fur perfectly.

Oh, great, I thought. *We just made him angry.*

Meg summoned her golden swords.

Grover fumbled for his reed pipes.

I prepared to run away screaming.

"Wait," Piper said.

The guard listed sideways, as if the whole city were tilting to starboard, then passed out cold on the sidewalk.

I raised my eyebrows. *"Poison?"*

"Grandpa Tom's special recipe," Piper said. "Now, come on. I'll show you what's *really* weird about Fuzz Face."

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15

Grover leaves early
Grover is a smart satyr
Lester, not so much

"WHAT *is* he?" Meg asked again. "He's fun."

Fun would not have been my adjective of choice.

The guard lay sprawled on his back, his lips foaming, his half-lidded eyes twitching in a semiconscious state.

Each of his hands had eight fingers. That explained why they'd looked so large from a distance. Judging from the width of his black leather shoes, I guessed he had eight toes as well. He seemed young, no more than a teenager in human terms, but except for his forehead and cheeks, his whole face was covered in fine white fur that resembled the chest hair of a terrier.

The real conversation piece was his ears. What I had mistaken for a headdress had come unfurled, revealing two floppy ovals of cartilage, shaped like human ears but each the size of a beach towel, which told me immediately that the poor boy's middle school nickname would have been Dumbo. His ear canals were wide enough to catch baseballs, and stuffed with so much hair that Piper could have used it to fletch an entire quiverful of darts.

"Big Ears," I said.

"Duh," said Meg.

"No, I mean this must be one of the Big Ears that Macro spoke of."

Grover took a step back. "The creatures Caligula is using for his personal guard? Do they have to be so *scary-looking*?"

I walked a circle around the young humanoid. "Think how keen his hearing must be! And imagine all the guitar chords he could play with those hands. How have I never seen this species before? They would make the world's best musicians!"

“Hmm,” Piper said. “I don’t know about music, but they fight like you wouldn’t believe. Two of them almost killed Jason and me, and we’ve fought a lot of different monsters.”

I saw no weapons on the guard, but I could believe he was a tough fighter. Those eight-fingered fists could have done some damage. Still, it seemed a waste to train these creatures for war….

“Unbelievable,” I murmured. “After four thousand years, I am still discovering new things.”

“Like how dumb you are,” Meg volunteered.

“No.”

“So you already knew that?”

“Guys,” Grover interrupted. “What do we do with Big Ears?”

“Kill him,” Meg said.

I frowned at her. “What happened to *He’s fun*? What happened to *Everything alive deserves a chance to grow*?”

“He works for the emperors,” she said. “He’s a monster. He’ll just dust back to Tartarus, right?”

Meg looked at Piper for confirmation, but she was busy scanning the street.

“Still seems odd there’s only one guard,” Piper mused. “And why is he so young? After we broke in once already, you’d think they’d put *more* guards on duty. Unless…”

She didn’t finish the thought, but I heard it loud and clear: *Unless they want us to come in.*

I studied the guard’s face, which was still twitching from the effects of the poison. Why did I have to think of his face as the fuzzy underside of a dog? It made killing him difficult.

“Piper, what does your poison do, exactly?”

She knelt and pulled out the dart. “Judging from how it worked on the other Big Ears, it will paralyze him for a long while but won’t kill him. It’s diluted coral-snake venom with a few special herbal ingredients.”

“Remind me never to drink your herbal tea,” Grover muttered.

Piper smirked. “We can just leave Big Ears. Doesn’t seem right to dust him to Tartarus.”

“Hmph.” Meg looked unconvinced, but she flicked her twin blades, instantly snapping them back into golden rings.

Piper walked to the metal door. She pulled it open, revealing a rusty freight elevator with a single control lever and no gate.

“Okay, just so we’re clear,” Piper said, “I’ll show you where Jason and I entered the maze, but I’m not doing the stereotypical Native American tracker thing. I don’t know tracking. I’m not your guide.”

We all readily agreed, as one does when delivered an ultimatum by a

friend with strong opinions and poison darts.

"Also," she continued, "if any of you find the need for spiritual guidance on this quest, I am not here to provide that service. I'm not going to dispense bits of ancient Cherokee wisdom."

"Very well," I said. "Though as a former prophecy god, I enjoy bits of spiritual wisdom."

"Then you'll have to ask the satyr," Piper said.

Grover cleared his throat. "Um, recycling is good karma?"

"There you go," Piper said. "Everybody good? All aboard."

The interior of the elevator was poorly lit and smelled of sulfur. I recalled that Hades had an elevator in Los Angeles that led to the Underworld. I hoped Piper hadn't gotten her quests mixed up.

"Are you sure this thing goes to the Burning Maze?" I asked. "Because I didn't bring any rawhide chews for Cerberus."

Grover whimpered. "You *had* to mention Cerberus. That's *bad* karma."

Piper threw the switch. The elevator rattled and began to sink at the same speed as my spirits.

"This first part is all mortal," Piper assured us. "Downtown Los Angeles is riddled with abandoned subway tunnels, air-raid shelters, sewer lines…."

"All my favorite things," Grover murmured.

"I don't really know the history," Piper said, "but Jason told me some of the tunnels were used by smugglers and partyers during Prohibition. Now you get taggers, runaways, homeless folks, monsters, government employees."

Meg's mouth twitched. "Government employees?"

"It's true," Piper said. "Some of the city workers use the tunnels to go from building to building."

Grover shuddered. "When they could just walk in the sunlight with nature? Repulsive."

Our rusty metal box rattled and creaked. Whatever was below would definitely hear us coming, especially if they had ears the size of beach towels.

After perhaps fifty feet, the elevator shuddered to a stop. Before us stretched a cement corridor, perfectly square and boring, lit by weak blue fluorescents.

"Doesn't seem so scary," said Meg.

"Just wait," Piper said. "The fun stuff is up ahead."

Grover fluttered his hands halfheartedly. "Yay."

The square corridor opened into a larger round tunnel, its ceiling lined with ducts and pipes. The walls were so heavily tagged they might have been an undiscovered Jackson Pollock masterpiece. Empty cans, dirty clothes, and mildewed sleeping bags littered the floor, filling the air with the unmistakable odor of a homeless camp: sweat, urine, and utter despair.

None of us spoke. I tried to breathe as little as possible until we emerged

into an even larger tunnel, this one lined with rusty train tracks. Along the walls, pitted metal signs read HIGH VOLTAGE, NO ENTRY, and THIS WAY OUT.

Railroad gravel crunched under our feet. Rats scurried along the tracks, chittering at Grover as they passed.

"Rats," he whispered, "are *so* rude."

After a hundred yards, Piper led us into a side hallway, this one tiled in linoleum. Half-burned-out banks of fluorescents flickered overhead. In the distance, barely visible in the dim light, two figures were slumped together on the floor. I assumed they were homeless people until Meg froze. "Are those dryads?"

Grover yelped in alarm. "Agave? Money Maker?" He sprinted forward, the rest of us following at his heels.

Agave was an enormous nature spirit, worthy of her plant. Standing, she would have been at least seven feet tall, with blue-gray skin, long limbs, and serrated hair that must've been literally murder to shampoo. Around her neck, her wrists, and her ankles, she wore spiked bands, just in case anyone tried to intrude on her personal space. Kneeling next to her friend, Agave didn't look too bad until she turned, revealing her burns. The left side of her face was a mass of charred tissue and glistening sap. Her left arm was nothing but a desiccated brown curl.

"Grover!" she rasped. "Help Money Maker. Please!"

He knelt next to the stricken dryad.

I'd never heard of a money maker plant before, but I could see how she got her name. Her hair was a thick cluster of plaited disks like green quarters. Her dress was made of the same stuff, so she appeared to be clad in a shower of chlorophyll coinage. Her face might have once been beautiful, but now it was shriveled like a week-old party balloon. From the knees down, her legs were gone—burned away. She tried to focus on us, but her eyes were opaque green. When she moved, jade coins dropped from her hair and dress.

"Grover's here?" She sounded like she was breathing a mixture of cyanide gas and metal filings. "Grover…we got so close."

The satyr's lower lip trembled. His eyes rimmed with tears. "What happened? How—?"

"Down there," said Agave. "Flames. She just came out of nowhere. Magic —" She began coughing up sap.

Piper peered warily down the corridor. "I'm going to scout ahead. Be right back. I do *not* want to be caught by surprise."

She dashed off down the hall.

Agave tried to speak again but fell over sideways. Somehow, Meg caught her and propped her up without getting impaled. She touched the dryad's shoulder, muttering under her breath *Grow, grow, grow*. Cracks began to mend in Agave's charred face. Her breathing eased. Then Meg turned to

Money Maker. She placed her hand on the dryad's chest, then recoiled as more jade petals shook loose.

"I can't do much for her down here," Meg said. "They both need water and sunlight. Right *now*."

"I'll get them to the surface," Grover said.

"I'll help," Meg said.

"No."

"Grover—"

"No!" His voice cracked. "Once I'm outside, I can heal them as well as you can. This is *my* search party, here on *my* orders. It's my responsibility to help them. Besides, your quest is down here with Apollo. You really want him going on without you?"

I thought this was an excellent point. I would need Meg's help.

Then I noticed the way they were both looking at me, as if they doubted my abilities, my courage, my capacity to finish this quest without a twelve-year-old girl holding my hand.

They were right, of course, but that made it no less embarrassing.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I'm sure if I *had* to…"

Meg and Grover had already lost interest in me, as if my feelings were not their primary concern. (I know. I couldn't believe it either.) Together they helped Agave to her feet.

"I'm fine," Agave insisted, tottering dangerously. "I can walk. Just get Money Maker."

Gently, Grover picked her up.

"Careful," Meg warned. "Don't shake her or she'll lose all her petals."

"Don't shake Money Maker," Grover said. "Got it. Good luck!"

Grover hurried into the darkness with the two dryads just as Piper returned.

"Where are they going?" she asked.

Meg explained.

Piper's frown deepened. "I hope they get out okay. If that guard wakes up…" She let the thought expire. "Anyway, we'd better keep going. Stay alert. Heads on a swivel."

Short of injecting myself with pure caffeine and electrifying my underwear, I wasn't sure how I could possibly be more alert or swivel-headed, but Meg and I followed Piper down the grim fluorescent hall.

Another thirty yards, and the corridor opened into a vast space that looked like…

"Wait," I said. "Is this an underground parking garage?"

It certainly seemed so, except for the complete absence of cars. Stretching into the darkness, the polished cement floor was painted with yellow directional arrows and rows of empty grid spaces. Lines of square pillars

supported the ceiling twenty feet above. Posted on some of them were signs like: HONK. EXIT. YIELD TO LEFT.

In a car-crazy town like LA, it seemed odd that anyone would abandon a usable parking garage. Then again, I supposed street meters sounded pretty good when your other option was a creepy maze frequented by taggers, dryad search parties, and government workers.

"This is the place," Piper said. "Where Jason and I got separated."

The smell of sulfur was stronger here, mixed with a sweeter fragrance… like cloves and honey. It made me edgy, reminding me of something I couldn't quite place—something dangerous. I resisted the urge to run.

Meg wrinkled her nose. "Pee-yoo."

"Yeah," Piper agreed. "That smell was here last time. I thought it meant…" She shook her head. "Anyway, right about here, a wall of flames came roaring out of nowhere. Jason ran right. I ran left. I'm telling you—that heat seemed malevolent. It was the most intense fire I've ever felt, and I've fought Enceladus."

I shivered, remembering that giant's fiery breath. We used to send him boxes of chewable antacids for Saturnalia, just to make him mad.

"And after you and Jason got separated?" I asked.

Piper moved to the nearest pillar. She ran her hand along the letters of a YIELD sign. "I tried to find him, of course. But he just disappeared. I searched for a long time. I was pretty freaked-out. I wasn't going to lose another…"

She hesitated, but I understood. She had already suffered the loss of Leo Valdez, who until recently she had assumed dead. She wasn't going to lose another friend.

"Anyway," she said, "I started smelling that fragrance. That kind of clove scent?"

"It's distinctive," I agreed.

"Yucky," Meg corrected.

"It started to get really strong," Piper said. "I'll be honest, I got scared. Alone, in the dark, I panicked. I left." She grimaced. "Not very heroic, I know."

I wasn't going to criticize, given the fact that my knees were presently knocking together the Morse code message *RUN AWAY!*

"Jason showed up later," Piper said. "Simply walked out of the exit. He wouldn't talk about what had happened. He just said going back in the maze wouldn't accomplish anything. The answers were elsewhere. He said he wanted to look into some ideas and get back to me." She shrugged. "That was two weeks ago. I'm still waiting."

"He found the Oracle," I guessed.

"That's what I'm wondering. Maybe if we go that way"—Piper pointed to the right—"we'll find out."

None of us moved. None of us yelled *Hooray!* and skipped merrily into the sulfur-infused darkness.

My thoughts spun so rapidly I wondered if my head actually *was* on a swivel.

Malevolent heat, as if it had a personality. The nickname of the emperor: Neos Helios, the New Sun, Caligula's bid to brand himself as a living god. Something Naevius Macro had said: *I just hope there's enough of you left for the emperor's magical friend to work with.*

And that fragrance, clove and honey…like an ancient perfume, combined with sulfur.

"Agave said 'she just came out of nowhere,'" I recalled.

Piper's hand tightened on the hilt of her dagger. "I was hoping I misheard that. Or maybe by *she*, she meant Money Maker."

"Hey," Meg said. "Listen."

It was difficult over the loud swiveling of my head and the electricity crackling in my underwear, but finally I heard it: the clatter of wood and metal, echoing in the darkness, and the hiss and scrape of large creatures moving at a fast pace.

"Piper," I said, "what did that perfume remind you of? Why did it scare you?"

Her eyes now looked as electric blue as her harpy feather. "An—an old enemy, somebody my mom warned me I would see again someday. But she couldn't possibly be—"

"A sorceress," I guessed.

"Guys," Meg interrupted.

"Yeah." Piper's voice turned cold and heavy, as if she was just realizing how much trouble we were actually in.

"A sorceress from Colchis," I said. "A grandchild of Helios, who drove a chariot."

"Pulled by dragons," Piper said.

"Guys," Meg said, more urgently, "we need to hide."

Too late, of course.

The chariot rattled around the corner, pulled by twin golden dragons that spewed yellow fumes from their nostrils like sulfur-fueled locomotives. The driver had not changed since I'd last seen her, a few thousand years ago. She was still dark-haired and regal, her black silk dress rippling around her.

Piper pulled her knife. She stepped into view. Meg followed her lead, summoning her swords and standing shoulder to shoulder with the daughter of Aphrodite. I, foolishly, stood at their side.

"Medea." Piper spat out the word with as much venom and force as she would a dart from her blowgun.

The sorceress pulled the reins, bringing her chariot to a halt. Under

different circumstances, I might have enjoyed the surprised look on her face, but it didn't last long.

Medea laughed with genuine pleasure. "Piper McLean, you darling girl." She turned her dark rapacious gaze on me. "This is Apollo, I take it? Oh, you've saved me so much time and trouble. And after we're done, Piper, you'll make a lovely snack for my dragons!"

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16

Let's charmspeak battle
You are ugly and you suck
The end. Do I win?

SUN dragons…I hate them. And I was a sun god.

As dragons go, they aren't particularly large. With a little lubrication and muscle, you can stuff one inside a mortal recreational vehicle. (And I have done so. You should have seen the look on Hephaestus's face when I asked him to go inside the Winnebago to check the brake pedal.)

But what they lack in size, sun dragons make up for in viciousness.

Medea's twin pets snarled and snapped, their fangs like porcelain in the fiery kilns of their mouths. Heat rippled off their golden scales. Their wings, folded against their backs, flashed like solar panels. Worst of all were their glowing orange eyes….

Piper shoved me, breaking my gaze. "Don't stare," she warned. "They'll paralyze you."

"I know that," I muttered, though my legs had been in the process of turning to rock. I'd forgotten I wasn't a god anymore. I was no longer immune to little things like sun dragons' eyes and, you know, getting killed.

Piper elbowed Meg. "Hey. You too."

Meg blinked, coming out of her stupor. "What? They're pretty."

"Thank you, my dear!" Medea's voice turned gentle and soothing. "We haven't formerly met. I'm Medea. And you're obviously Meg McCaffrey. I've heard so much about you." She patted the chariot rail next to her. "Come up, darling. You needn't fear me. I'm friends with your stepfather. I'll take you to him."

Meg frowned, confused. The points of her swords dipped. "What?"

"She's charmspeaking." Piper's voice hit me like a glass of ice water in the face. "Meg, don't listen to her. Apollo, you neither."

Medea sighed. "Really, Piper McLean? Are we going to have another

charmspeak battle?”

“No need,” Piper said. “I’d just win again.”

Medea curled her lip in a good imitation of her sun dragons’ snarls. “Meg belongs with her stepfather.” She swept a hand toward me as if pushing away some trash. “Not with this sorry excuse for a god.”

“Hey!” I protested. “If I had my powers—”

“But you don’t,” Medea said. “Look at yourself, Apollo. Look what your father has done to you! Not to worry, though. Your misery is at an end. I’ll squeeze out whatever power is left and put it to good use!”

Meg’s knuckles turned white on the grips of her swords. “What does she mean?” she muttered. “Hey, Magic Lady, what do you mean?”

The sorceress smiled. She no longer wore the crown of her birthright as princess of Colchis, but at her throat a golden pendant still gleamed—the crossed torches of Hecate. “Shall I tell her, Apollo, or should you? Surely you know why I’ve brought you here.”

Why she had brought me here.

As if each step I’d taken since climbing out of that dumpster in Manhattan had been preordained, orchestrated by her…The problem was: I found that entirely plausible. This sorceress had destroyed kingdoms. She had betrayed her own father by helping the original Jason steal the Golden Fleece. She had killed her own brother and chopped him to bits. She had murdered her own children. She was the most brutal and power-hungry of Hecate’s followers, and also the most formidable. Not only that, but she was a demigod of ancient blood, the granddaughter of Helios himself, former Titan of the sun.

Which meant…

It all came to me at once, a realization so horrible my knees buckled.

“Apollo!” Piper barked. “Get up!”

I tried. I really did. My limbs would not cooperate. I hunched over on all fours and exhaled an undignified moan of pain and terror. I heard a *clap-clap-clap* and wondered if the moorings that anchored my mind to my mortal skull had finally snapped.

Then I realized Medea was giving me a polite round of applause.

“There it is.” She chuckled. “It took you a while, but even *your* slow brain got there eventually.”

Meg grabbed my arm. “You’re not giving in, Apollo,” she ordered. “Tell me what’s going on.”

She hauled me to my feet.

I tried to form words, to comply with her demand for an explanation. I made the mistake of looking at Medea, whose eyes were as transfixing as her dragons’. In her face, I saw the vicious glee and bright violence of Helios, her grandfather, as he had been in his glory days—before he faded into oblivion, before I took his place as master of the sun chariot.

I remembered how the emperor Caligula had died. He'd been on the verge of leaving Rome, planning to sail to Egypt and make a new capital there, in a land where people understood about living gods. He had meant to *make* himself a living god: Neos Helios, the New Sun—not just in name, but *literally*. That's why his praetors were so anxious to kill him on the evening before he left the city.

What's his endgame? Grover had asked.

My satyr spiritual advisor had been on the right track.

"Caligula's always had the same goal," I croaked. "He wants to be the center of creation, the new god of the sun. He wants to supplant me, the way I supplanted Helios."

Medea smiled. "And it really couldn't happen to a nicer god."

Piper shifted. "What do you mean…*supplant*?"

"Replace!" Medea said, then began counting on her fingers as if giving cooking tips on daytime television. "First, I extract every bit of Apollo's immortal essence—which isn't much at the moment, so that won't take long. Then, I'll add his essence to what I already have cooking, the leftover power of my dearly departed grandfather."

"Helios," I said. "The flames in the maze. I—I recognized his anger."

"Well, Grandpa's a bit cranky." Medea shrugged. "That happens when your life force fades to practically nothing, then your granddaughter summons you back a little at a time, until you're a lovely raging firestorm. I wish you could suffer as Helios has suffered—howling for millennia in a state of semiconsciousness, just aware enough of what you've lost to feel the pain and resentment. But alas, we don't have that much time. Caligula is anxious. I'll take what's left of you and Helios, invest that power in my friend the emperor, and voilà! A new god of the sun!"

Meg grunted. "That's dumb," she said, as if Medea had suggested a new rule for hide-and-seek. "You can't do that. You can't just destroy a god and make a new one!"

Medea didn't bother answering.

I knew that what she described was *entirely* possible. The emperors of Rome had made themselves semidivine simply by instituting worship among the populace. Over the centuries, several mortals had made themselves gods, or were promoted to godhood by the Olympians. My father, Zeus, had made Ganymede an immortal simply because he was cute and knew how to serve wine!

As for destroying gods…most of the Titans had been slain or banished thousands of years ago. And I was standing here now, a mere mortal, stripped of all godliness for the *third time*, simply because Daddy wanted to teach me a lesson.

For a sorceress of Medea's power, such magic was within reach, provided her victims were weak enough to be overcome—such as the remnants of a long-faded Titan, or a sixteen-year-old fool named Lester who had strolled right into her trap.

"You would destroy your own grandfather?" I asked.

Medea shrugged. "Why not? You gods are all family, but you're constantly trying to kill each other."

I hate it when evil sorceresses have a point.

Medea extended her hand toward Meg. "Now, my dear, hop up here with me. Your place is with Nero. All will be forgiven, I promise."

Charmspeak flowed through her words like Aloe Vera's gel—slimy and cold but somehow soothing. I didn't see how Meg could possibly resist. Her past, her stepfather, especially the Beast—they were never far from her mind.

"Meg," Piper countered, "don't let either of us tell you what to do. Make up your own mind."

Bless Piper's intuition, appealing to Meg's stubborn streak. And bless Meg's willful, weed-covered little heart. She interposed herself between me and Medea. "Apollo's *my* dumb servant. You can't have him."

The sorceress sighed. "I appreciate your courage, dear. Nero told me you were special. But my patience has limits. Shall I give you a taste of what you are dealing with?"

Medea lashed her reins, and the dragons charged.

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17

Phil and Don are dead
Bye-bye, love and happiness
Hello, headlessness

I enjoy running people over in a chariot as much as the next deity, but I did *not* like the idea of being the guy run over.

As the dragons barreled toward us, Meg stood her ground, which was either admirable or suicidal. I tried to decide whether to cower behind her or leap out of the way—both options less admirable but also less suicidal—when the choice became irrelevant. Piper threw her dagger, impaling the left dragon's eye.

Left Dragon shrieked in pain, pushed against Right Dragon, and sent the chariot veering off course. Medea barreled past us, just out of reach of Meg's swords, and disappeared into the darkness while screaming insults at her pets in ancient Colchian—a language no longer spoken, but which featured twenty-seven different words for *kill* and not a single way to say *Apollo rocks*. I hated the Colchians.

"You guys okay?" Piper asked. The tip of her nose was sunburn red. The harpy feather smoldered in her hair. Such things happened during close encounters with superheated lizards.

"Fine," Meg grumbled. "I didn't even get to stab anything."

I gestured at Piper's empty knife sheath. "Nice shot."

"Yeah, now if I only had more daggers. Guess I'm back to using blowgun darts."

Meg shook her head. "Against those dragons? Did you see their armored hides? I'll take them with my swords."

In the distance, Medea continued yelling, trying to get her beasts under control. The harsh creak of wheels told me the chariot was turning for another pass.

“Meg,” I said, “it’ll only take Medea one charmspoken word to defeat you. If she says *stumble* at the right moment…”

Meg glowered at me, as if it were *my* fault the sorceress could charmspeak. “Can we shut up Magic Lady somehow?”

“It would be easier to cover your ears,” I suggested.

Meg retracted her blades. She rummaged through her supplies while the rumble of the chariot’s wheels got faster and closer.

“Hurry,” I said.

Meg ripped open a pack of seeds. She sprinkled some in each of her ear canals, then pinched her nose and exhaled. Tufts of bluebonnets sprouted from her ears.

“That’s interesting,” Piper said.

“WHAT?” Meg shouted.

Piper shook her head. *Never mind*.

Meg offered us bluebonnet seeds. We both declined. Piper, I guessed, was naturally resistant to other charmspeakers. As for me, I did not intend to get close enough to be Medea’s primary target. Nor did I have Meg’s weakness—a conflicted desire, misguided but powerful, to please her stepfather and reclaim some semblance of home and family—which Medea could and would exploit. Besides, the idea of walking around with lupines sticking out of my ears made me queasy.

“Get ready,” I warned.

“WHAT?” Meg asked.

I pointed at Medea’s chariot, now charging toward us out of the gloom. I traced my finger across my throat, the universal sign for *kill that sorceress and her dragons*.

Meg summoned her swords.

She charged the sun dragons as if they were not ten times her size.

Medea yelled with what sounded like real concern, “Move, Meg!”

Meg charged on, her festive ear protection bouncing up and down like giant blue dragonfly wings. Just before a head-on collision, Piper shouted, “DRAGONS, HALT!”

Medea countered, “DRAGONS, GO!”

The result: chaos not seen since Plan Thermopylae.

The beasts lurched in their harnesses, Right Dragon charging forward, Left Dragon stopping completely. Right stumbled, pulling Left forward so the two dragons crashed together. The yoke twisted and the chariot toppled sideways, throwing Medea across the pavement like a cow from a catapult.

Before the dragons could recover, Meg plunged in with her double blades. She beheaded Left and Right, releasing from their bodies a blast of heat so intense my sinuses sizzled.

Piper ran forward and yanked her dagger from the dead dragon’s eye.

“Good job,” she told Meg.

“WHAT?” Meg asked.

I emerged from behind a cement column, where I had courageously taken cover, waiting in case my friends required backup.

Pools of dragon blood steamed at Meg’s feet. Her lupine ear accessories smoked, and her cheeks were burned, but otherwise she looked unharmed. The heat radiating from the sun dragon bodies had already started to cool.

Thirty feet away, in a COMPACT CAR ONLY spot, Medea struggled to her feet. Her dark braided hairdo had come undone, spilling down one side of her face like oil from a punctured tanker. She staggered forward, baring her teeth.

I slung my bow from my shoulder and fired a shot. My aim was decent, but even for a mortal, my strength was feeble. Medea flicked her fingers. A gust of wind sent my arrow spinning into the dark.

“You killed Phil and Don!” snarled the sorceress. “They’ve been with me for millennia!”

“WHAT?” Meg asked.

With a wave of her hand, Medea summoned a stronger blast of air. Meg flew across the parking garage, crashed into the pillar, and crumpled, her swords clattering against the asphalt.

“Meg!” I tried to run to her, but more wind swirled around me, caging me in a vortex.

Medea laughed. “Stay right there, Apollo. I’ll get to you in a moment. Don’t worry about Meg. The descendants of Plemnaeus are of hardy stock. I won’t kill her unless I have to. Nero wants her alive.”

The descendants of Plemnaeus? I wasn’t sure what that meant, or how it applied to Meg, but the thought of her being returned to Nero made me struggle harder.

I threw myself against the miniature cyclone. The wind shoved me back. If you’ve ever held your hand out the window of the sun Maserati as it speeds across the sky, and felt the force of a thousand-mile-an-hour wind shear threatening to rip your immortal fingers off, I’m sure you can relate.

“As for you, Piper…” Medea’s eyes glittered like black ice. “You remember my aerial servants, the *venti*? I could simply have one throw you against a wall and break every bone in your body, but what fun would that be?” She paused and seemed to consider her words. “Actually, that would be a lot of fun!”

“Too scared?” Piper blurted out. “Of facing me yourself, woman to woman?”

Medea sneered. “Why do heroes always do that? Why do they try to taunt me into doing something foolish?”

“Because it usually works,” Piper said sweetly. She crouched with her blowgun in one hand and her knife in the other, ready to lunge or dodge as

needed. “You keep saying you’re going to kill me. You keep telling me how powerful you are. But I keep beating you. I don’t see a powerful sorceress. I see a lady with two dead dragons and a bad hairdo.”

I understood what Piper was doing, of course. She was giving us time—for Meg to regain consciousness, and for me to find a way out of my personal tornado prison. Neither event seemed likely. Meg lay motionless where she had fallen. Try as I might, I could not body-slam my way through the swirling ventus.

Medea touched her crumbling hairdo, then pulled her hand away.

“You’ve never beaten me, Piper McLean,” she growled. “In fact, you did me a favor by destroying my home in Chicago last year. If not for that, I wouldn’t have found my new friend here in Los Angeles. Our goals align very well indeed.”

“Oh, I bet,” Piper said. “You and Caligula, the most twisted Roman emperor in history? A match made in Tartarus. In fact, that’s where I’m going to send you.”

On the other side of the chariot wreckage, Meg McCaffrey’s fingers twitched. Her bluebonnet earplugs shivered as she took a deep breath. I had never been so glad to see wildflowers tremble in someone’s ears!

I pushed my shoulder against the wind. I still couldn’t break through, but the barrier seemed to be softening, as if Medea was losing focus on her minion. Venti were fickle spirits. Without Medea keeping it on task, the air servant was likely to lose interest and fly off to find some nice pigeons or airplane pilots to harass.

“Brave words, Piper,” said the sorceress. “Caligula wanted to kill you and Jason Grace, you know. It would have been simpler. But I convinced him it would be better to let you suffer in exile. I liked the idea of you and your formerly famous father stuck on a dirt farm in Oklahoma, both of you slowly going mad with boredom and hopelessness.”

Piper’s jaw muscles tensed. Suddenly she reminded me of her mother, Aphrodite, whenever someone on earth compared their own beauty to hers. “You’re going to regret letting me live.”

“Probably.” Medea shrugged. “But it has been fun watching your world fall apart. As for Jason, that lovely boy with the name of my former husband —”

“What about him?” Piper demanded. “If you’ve hurt him—”

“Hurt him? Not at all! I imagine he’s in school right now, listening to some boring lecture, or writing an essay, or whatever dreary work mortal teenagers do. The last time you two were in the maze…” She smiled. “Yes, of course I know about that. We granted him access to the Sibyl. That’s the only way to find her, you know. I have to *allow* you to reach the center of the maze —unless you’re wearing the emperor’s shoes, of course.” Medea laughed, as

if the idea amused her. “And really, they wouldn’t go with your outfit.”

Meg tried to sit up. Her glasses had slipped sideways and were hanging from the tip of her nose.

I elbowed my cyclone cage. The wind was definitely swirling more slowly now.

Piper gripped her knife. “What did you do to Jason? What did the Sibyl say?”

“She only told him the truth,” Medea said with satisfaction. “He wanted to know how to find the emperor. The Sibyl told him. But she told him a bit *more* than that, as Oracles often do. The truth was enough to break Jason Grace. He won’t be a threat to anyone now. Neither will you.”

“You’re going to pay,” Piper said.

“Lovely!” Medea rubbed her hands. “I’m feeling generous, so I’ll grant your request. A duel just between us, woman to woman. Choose your weapon. I’ll choose mine.”

Piper hesitated, no doubt remembering how the wind had knocked my arrow aside. She shouldered her blowgun, leaving herself armed with just her dagger.

“A pretty weapon,” Medea said. “Pretty like Helen of Troy. Pretty like you. But, woman to woman, let me give you some advice. *Pretty* can be useful. *Powerful* is better. For my weapon, I choose Helios, the Titan of the sun!”

She lifted her arms, and fire erupted around her.

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18

Whoa, there, Medea
Don't be all up in my face
With your hot granddad

RULE of dueling etiquette: When choosing a weapon for single combat, you should *absolutely not* choose to wield your grandfather.

I was no stranger to fire.

I had fed nuggets of molten gold to the sun horses with my bare hands. I'd gone swimming in the calderas of active volcanoes. (Hephaestus does throw a great pool party.) I had withstood the fiery breath of giants, dragons, and even my sister before she'd brushed her teeth in the morning. But none of those horrors could compare to the pure essence of Helios, former Titan of the sun.

He had not always been hostile. Oh, he was fine in his glory days! I remembered his beardless face, eternally young and handsome, his curly dark hair crowned with a golden diadem of fire that made him too bright to look upon for more than an instant. In his flowing golden robes, his burning scepter in hand, he would stroll through the halls of Olympus, chatting and joking and flirting shamelessly.

Yes, he was a Titan, but Helios had supported the gods during our first war with Kronos. He had fought at our sides against the giants. He possessed a kind and generous aspect—*warm,* as one would expect from the sun.

But gradually, as the Olympians gained power and fame among human worshippers, the memory of the Titans faded. Helios appeared less and less often in the halls of Mount Olympus. He became distant, angry, fierce, withering—all those *less* desirable solar qualities.

Humans began to look at me—brilliant, golden, and shining—and associate me with the sun. Can you blame them?

I never asked for the honor. One morning I simply woke up and found myself the master of the sun chariot, along with all my other duties. Helios

faded to a dim echo, a whisper from the depths of Tartarus.

Now, thanks to his evil sorceress granddaughter, he was back. Sort of.

A white-hot maelstrom roared around Medea. I felt Helios's anger, his scorching temper that used to scare the daylights out of me. (Ew, bad pun. Sorry.)

Helios had never been a god of all trades. He was not like me, with many talents and interests. He did *one* thing with dedication and piercing focus: he drove the sun. Now, I could feel how bitter he was, knowing that his role had been assumed by *me*, a mere dabbler in solar matters, a weekend sun-chariot driver. For Medea, gathering his power from Tartarus had not been difficult. She had simply called on his resentment, his desire for revenge. Helios was *burning* to destroy me, the god who had eclipsed him. (Ew, there's another one.)

Piper McLean ran. This was not a matter of bravery or cowardice. A demigod's body simply wasn't designed to endure such heat. Had she stayed in Medea's proximity, Piper would have burst into flames.

The only positive development: my ventus jailer vanished, most likely because Medea couldn't focus on both him and Helios. I stumbled toward Meg, yanked her to her feet, and dragged her away from the growing firestorm.

"Oh, no, Apollo," Medea called out. "No running away!"

I pulled Meg behind the nearest cement column and covered her as a curtain of flame sliced across the garage—sharp and fast and deadly, sucking the air from my lungs and setting my clothes on fire. I rolled instinctively, desperately, and crawled behind the next column over, smoking and dizzy.

Meg staggered to my side. She was steaming and red but still alive, her toasted lupines stubbornly rooted in her ears. I had shielded her from the worst of the heat.

From somewhere across the parking garage, Piper's voice echoed, "Hey, Medea! Your aim sucks!"

I peeked around the column as Medea turned toward the sound. The sorceress stood fixed in place, encircled in fire, releasing slices of white heat in every direction like spokes from the center of a wheel. One wave blasted in the direction of Piper's voice.

A moment later, Piper called, "Nope! Getting colder!"

Meg shook my arm. "WHAT DO WE DO?"

My skin felt like a cooked sausage casing. Blood sang in my veins, the lyrics being *HOT, HOT, HOT!*

I knew I would die if I suffered even another glancing blast from that fire. But Meg was right. We had to do something. We couldn't let Piper take all the (quite literal) heat.

"Come out, Apollo!" Medea taunted. "Say hello to your old friend!

Together you will fuel the New Sun!”

Another curtain of heat flashed past, a few columns away. The essence of Helios did not roar or dazzle with many colors. It was ghostly white, almost transparent, but it would kill us as fast as exposure to a nuclear core. (Public safety announcement: Reader, do *not* go to your local nuclear power plant and stand in the reactor chamber.)

I had no strategy to defeat Medea. I had no godly powers, no godly wisdom, nothing but a terrified feeling that, if I survived this, I would need another set of pink camo pants.

Meg must have seen the hopelessness in my face.

“ASK THE ARROW!” she yelled. “I WILL KEEP MAGIC LADY DISTRACTED!”

I hated that idea. I was tempted to yell back *WHAT?*

Before I could, Meg darted off.

I fumbled for my quiver and pulled forth the Arrow of Dodona. “O Wise Projectile, we need help!”

IS’T HOT IN HITHER? the arrow asked. *OR IS’T JUST ME?*

“We have a sorceress throwing Titan heat around!” I yelled. “Look!”

I wasn’t sure if the arrow had magical eyes, or radar, or some other way to sense its environment, but I stuck its point around the corner of the pillar, where Piper and Meg were now playing a deadly game of chicken—fried chicken—with Medea’s blasts of grandfather fire.

HAST YON WENCH A BLOWGUN? the arrow demanded.

“Yes.”

FIE! A BOW AND ARROWS ART FAR SUPERIOR!

“She’s half-Cherokee,” I said. “It’s a traditional Cherokee weapon. Now can you *please* tell me how to defeat Medea?”

HMM, the arrow mused. *THOU MUST USE THE BLOWGUN.*

“But you just said—”

REMIND ME NOT! ’TIS BITTER TO SPEAK OF! THOU HAST THY ANSWER!

The arrow went silent. The one time I *wanted* it to elaborate, the arrow shut up. Naturally.

I shoved it back in my quiver and ran to the next column, taking cover under a sign that read HONK!

“Piper!” I yelled.

She glanced over from five pillars away. Her face was pulled in a tight grimace. Her arms looked like cooked lobster shells. My medical mind told me she had a few hours at best before heatstroke set in—nausea, dizziness, unconsciousness, probably death. But I focused on the *few hours* part. I needed to believe we would live long enough to die from such causes.

I mimed shooting a blowgun, then pointed in Medea's direction.

Piper stared at me like I was crazy. I couldn't blame her. Even if Medea didn't bat away the dart with a gust of wind, the missile would never make it through that swirling wall of heat. I could only shrug and mouth the words *Trust me. I asked my arrow.*

What Piper thought of that, I couldn't tell, but she unslung her blowgun.

Meanwhile, across the parking garage, Meg taunted Medea in typical Meg fashion.

"DUMMY!" she yelled.

Medea sent out a vertical blade of heat, though judging from her aim, she was trying to scare Meg rather than kill her.

"Come out and stop this foolishness, dear!" she called, filling her words with concern. "I don't want to hurt you, but the Titan is hard to control!"

I ground my teeth. Her words were a little too close to Nero's mind games, holding Meg in check with the threat of his alter ego, the Beast. I just hoped Meg couldn't hear a word through her smoldering wildflower earbuds.

While Medea had her back turned, looking for Meg, Piper stepped into the open.

She took her shot.

The dart flew straight through the wall of fire and speared Medea between the shoulder blades. How? I can only speculate. Perhaps, being a Cherokee weapon, it was not subject to the rules of Greek magic. Perhaps, just as Celestial bronze will pass straight through regular mortals, not recognizing them as legitimate targets, the fires of Helios could not be bothered to disintegrate a puny blowgun dart.

Whatever the case, the sorceress arched her back and screamed. She turned, glowering, then reached behind her and pulled out the missile. She stared at it incredulously. "*A blowgun dart?* Are you kidding me?"

The fires continued to swirl around her, but none shot toward Piper. Medea staggered. Her eyes crossed.

"And it's *poison*?" The sorceress laughed, her voice tinged with hysteria. "You would try to poison *me*, the world's foremost expert on poisons? There is no poison I can't cure! You cannot—"

She dropped to her knees. Green spittle flew from her mouth. "Wh-what is this concoction?"

"Compliments of my Grandpa Tom," Piper said. "Old family recipe."

Medea's complexion turned as pale as the fire. She forced out a few words, interspersed with gagging. "You think…changes anything? My power…doesn't summon Helios….I hold him back!"

She fell over sideways. Rather than dissipating, the cone of fire swirled even more furiously around her.

"Run," I croaked. Then I yelled for all I was worth, "RUN NOW!"

We were halfway back to the corridor when the parking lot behind us went supernova.

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19

In my underclothes
Slathered with grease. Really not
As fun as it sounds

I am not sure how we got out of the maze.

Lacking any evidence to the contrary, I will credit my own courage and fortitude. Yes, that must have been it. Having escaped the worst of the Titan's heat, I bravely supported Piper and Meg and exhorted them to keep going. Smoking and half-conscious but still alive, we stumbled through the corridors, retracing our steps until we arrived at the freight elevator. With one last heroic burst of strength, I flipped the lever and we ascended.

We spilled into the sunlight—*regular* sunlight, not the vicious zombie sunlight of a quasi-dead Titan—and collapsed on the sidewalk. Grover's shocked face hovered over me.

"Hot," I whimpered.

Grover pulled out his panpipe. He began to play, and I lost consciousness.

In my dreams, I found myself at a party in ancient Rome. Caligula had just opened his newest palace at the base of the Palatine Hill, making a daring architectural statement by knocking out the back wall of the Temple of Castor and Pollux and using it as his front entrance. Since Caligula considered himself a god, he saw no problem with this, but the Roman elites were horrified. This was sacrilege akin to setting up a big-screen TV on a church altar and having a Super Bowl party with communion wine.

That didn't stop the crowd from attending the festivities. Some gods had even shown up (in disguise). How could we resist such an audacious, blasphemous party with free appetizers? Throngs of costumed revelers moved through vast torchlit halls. In every corner, musicians played songs from across the empire: Gaul, Hispania, Greece, Egypt.

I myself was dressed as a gladiator. (Back then, with my godly physique, I

could totally pull that off.) I mingled with senators who were disguised as slave girls, slave girls who were disguised as senators, a few unimaginative toga ghosts, and a couple of enterprising patricians who had crafted the world's first two-man donkey costume.

Personally, I did not mind the sacrilegious temple/palace. It wasn't *my* temple, after all. And in those first years of the Roman Empire, I found the Caesars refreshingly risqué. Besides, why should we gods punish our biggest benefactors?

When the emperors expanded their power, they expanded *our* power. Rome had spread our influence across a huge part of the world. Now we Olympians were the gods of the empire! Move over, Horus. Forget about it, Marduk. The Olympians were ascendant!

We weren't about to mess with success just because the emperors got big-headed, especially when they modeled their arrogance after ours.

I wandered the party incognito, enjoying being among all the pretty people, when he finally appeared: the young emperor himself, in a golden chariot pulled by his favorite white stallion, Incitatus.

Flanked by praetorian guards—the only people not in costume—Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus was buck naked, painted in gold from head to foot, with a spiky crown of sun rays across his brow. He was pretending to be *me*, obviously. But when I saw him, my first feeling wasn't anger. It was admiration. This beautiful, shameless mortal pulled off the role perfectly.

"I am the New Sun!" he announced, beaming at the crowd as if his smile were responsible for all the warmth in the world. "I am Helios. I am Apollo. I am Caesar. You may now bask in my light!"

Nervous applause from the crowd. Should they grovel? Should they laugh? It was always hard to tell with Caligula, and if you got it wrong, you usually died.

The emperor climbed down from his chariot. His horse was led to the hors d'oeuvres table while Caligula and his guards made their way through the crowd.

Caligula stopped and shook hands with a senator dressed as a slave. "You look lovely, Cassius Agrippa! Will you be my slave, then?"

The senator bowed. "I am your loyal servant, Caesar."

"Excellent!" Caligula turned to his guards. "You heard the man. He is now my slave. Take him to my slave master. Confiscate all his property and money. Let his family go free, though. I'm feeling generous."

The senator spluttered, but he could not form the words to protest. Two guards hustled him away as Caligula called after him, "Thank you for your loyalty!"

The crowd shifted like a herd of cattle in a thunderstorm. Those who had been surging forward, anxious to catch the emperor's eye and perhaps win his

favor, now tried their best to melt into the pack.

"It's a bad night," some whispered in warning to their colleagues. "He's having a bad night."

"Marcus Philo!" cried the emperor, cornering a poor young man who had been attempting to hide behind the two-man donkey. "Come out here, you scoundrel!"

"Pr-Princeps," the man stuttered.

"I *loved* the satire you wrote about me," Caligula said. "My guards found a copy of it in the Forum and brought it to my attention."

"S-sire," said Philo. "It was only a weak jest. I didn't mean—"

"Nonsense!" Caligula smiled at the crowd. "Isn't Philo great, everybody? Didn't you like his work? The way he described me as a rabid dog?"

The crowd was on the verge of full panic. The air was so full of electricity, I wondered if my father was there in disguise.

"I promised that poets would be free to express themselves!" Caligula announced. "No more paranoia like in old Tiberius's reign. I *admire* your silver tongue, Philo. I think *everyone* should have a chance to admire it. I will reward you!"

Philo gulped. "Thank you, lord."

"Guards," said Caligula, "take him away. Pull his tongue out, dip it in molten silver, and display it in the Forum where everyone can admire it. Really, Philo—wonderful work!"

Two praetorians hauled away the screaming poet.

"And you there!" Caligula called.

Only then did I realize the crowd had ebbed around me, leaving me exposed. Suddenly, Caligula was in my face. His beautiful eyes narrowed as he studied my costume, my godly physique.

"I don't recognize you," he said.

I wanted to speak. I knew that I had nothing to fear from Caesar. If worse came to worst, I could simply say *Bye!* and vanish in a cloud of glitter. But, I have to admit, in Caligula's presence, I was awestruck. The young man was wild, powerful, unpredictable. His audacity took my breath away.

At last, I managed a bow. "I am a mere actor, Caesar."

"Oh, indeed!" Caligula brightened. "And you play the gladiator. Would you fight to the death in my honor?"

I silently reminded myself that I was immortal. It took a little convincing. I drew my gladiator's sword, which was nothing but a costume blade of soft tin. "Point me to my opponent, Caesar!" I scanned the audience and bellowed, "I will destroy anyone who threatens my lord!"

To demonstrate, I lunged and poked the nearest praetorian guard in the chest. My sword bent against his breastplate. I held aloft my ridiculous weapon, which now resembled the letter *Z*.

A dangerous silence followed. All eyes fixed on Caesar.

Finally, Caligula laughed. “Well done!” He patted my shoulder, then snapped his fingers. One of his servants shuffled forward and handed me a heavy pouch of gold coins.

Caligula whispered in my ear, “I feel safer already.”

The emperor moved on, leaving onlookers laughing with relief, some casting envious glances at me as if to ask *What is your secret?*

After that, I stayed away from Rome for decades. It was a rare man who could make a god nervous, but Caligula unsettled me. He almost made a better Apollo than I did.

My dream changed. I saw Herophile again, the Sibyl of Erythraea, reaching out her shackled arms, her face lit red by the roiling lava below.

“Apollo,” she said, “it won’t seem worth it to you. I’m not sure it is myself. But you must come. You must hold them together in their grief.”

I sank into the lava, Herophile still calling my name as my body broke and crumbled into ash.

I woke up screaming, lying on top of a sleeping bag in the Cistern.

Aloe Vera hovered over me, her prickly triangles of hair mostly snapped off, leaving her with a glistening buzz cut.

“You’re okay,” she assured me, putting her cool hand against my fevered forehead. “You’ve been through a lot, though.”

I realized I was wearing only my underwear. My entire body was beet maroon, slathered in aloe. I couldn’t breathe through my nose. I touched my nostrils and discovered I had been fitted with small green aloe nose plugs.

I sneezed them out.

“My friends?” I asked.

Aloe moved aside. Behind her, Grover Underwood sat cross-legged between Piper’s and Meg’s sleeping bags, both girls fast asleep. Like me, they had been slathered with goo. It was a perfect opportunity to take a picture of Meg with green plugs sticking out of her nostrils, for blackmail purposes, but I was too relieved that she was alive. Also, I didn’t have a phone.

“Will they be all right?” I asked.

“They were in worse shape than you,” Grover said. “It was touch and go for a while, but they’ll pull through. I’ve been feeding them nectar and ambrosia.”

Aloe smiled. “Also, my healing properties are *legendary*. Just wait. They’ll be up and walking around by dinner.”

Dinner…I looked at the dark orange circle of sky above. Either it was late afternoon, or the wildfires were closer, or both.

“Medea?” I asked.

Grover frowned. “Meg told me about the battle before she passed out, but I don’t know what happened to the sorceress. I never saw her.”

I shivered in my aloe gel. I wanted to believe Medea had died in the fiery explosion, but I doubted we could be so lucky. Helios's fire hadn't seemed to bother her. Maybe she was naturally immune. Or maybe she had worked some protective magic on herself.

"Your dryad friends?" I asked. "Agave and Money Maker?"

Aloe and Grover exchanged a sorrowful look.

"Agave might pull through," said Grover. "She went dormant as soon as we got her back to her plant. But Money Maker…" He shook his head.

I had barely met the dryad. Still, the news of her death hit me hard. I felt as if *I* were dropping green leaf-coins from my body, shedding essential pieces of myself.

I thought about Herophile's words in my dream: *It won't seem worth it to you. I'm not sure it is myself. But you must come. You must hold them together in their grief.*

I feared that Money Maker's death was only one small part of the grief that awaited us.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Aloe patted my greasy shoulder. "It isn't your fault, Apollo. By the time you found her, she was too far gone. Unless you'd had…"

She stopped herself, but I knew what she'd intended to say: *Unless you'd had your godly healing powers.* A lot would have been different if I'd been a god, not a pretender in this pathetic Lester Papadopoulos disguise.

Grover touched the blowgun at Piper's side. The river-cane tube had been badly charred, pitted with burn holes that would probably make it unusable.

"Something else you should know," he said. "When Agave and I carried Money Maker out of the maze? That big-eared guard, the guy with the white fur? He was gone."

I considered this. "You mean he died and disintegrated? Or he got up and walked away?"

"I don't know," Grover said. "Does either seem likely?"

Neither did, but I decided we had bigger problems to think about.

"Tonight," I said, "when Piper and Meg wake up, we need to have another meeting with your dryad friends. We're going to put this Burning Maze out of business, once and for all."

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20

O Muse, let us now
Sing in praise of botanists!
They do plant stuff. Yay.

OUR council of war was more like a council of wincing.

Thanks to Grover's magic and Aloe Vera's constant sliming (I mean *attention*), Piper and Meg regained consciousness. By dinnertime, the three of us could wash, get dressed, and even walk around without screaming too much, but we still hurt a great deal. Every time I stood up too fast, tiny golden Caligulas danced before my eyes.

Piper's blowgun and quiver—both heirlooms from her grandfather—were ruined. Her hair was singed. Her burned arms, glistening with aloe, looked like newly glazed brick. She called her father to warn him she would be spending the night with her study group, then settled into one of the Cistern's brickwork alcoves with Mellie and Hedge, who kept urging her to drink more water. Baby Chuck sat in Piper's lap, staring enraptured at her face as if it were the most amazing thing in the world.

As for Meg, she sat glumly by the pool, her feet in the water, a plate of cheese enchiladas in her lap. She wore a baby blue T-shirt from Macro's Military Madness featuring a smiling cartoon AK-47 with the caption: SHOOTIE'S JUNIOR MARKSMAN CLUB! Next to her sat Agave, looking dejected, though a new green spike had started to grow where her withered arm had fallen off. Her dryad friends kept coming by, offering her fertilizer and water and enchiladas, but Agave shook her head glumly, staring at the collection of fallen money maker petals in her hand.

Money Maker, I was told, had been planted on the hillside with full dryad honors. Hopefully, she would be reincarnated as a beautiful new succulent, or perhaps a white-tailed antelope squirrel. Money Maker had always loved those.

Grover looked exhausted. Playing all the healing music had taken its toll, not to mention the stress of driving back to Palm Springs at unsafe speeds in the borrowed/slightly stolen Bedrossian-mobile with five critical burn victims.

Once we had all gathered—condolences exchanged, enchiladas eaten, aloe slimed—I began the meeting.

"All of this," I announced, "is my fault."

You can imagine how difficult this was for me to say. The words simply had not been in the vocabulary of Apollo. I half hoped the collected dryads, satyrs, and demigods would rush to reassure me that I was blameless. They did not.

I forged on. "Caligula's goal has always been the same: to make himself a god. He saw his ancestors immortalized after their deaths: Julius, Augustus, even disgusting old Tiberius. But Caligula didn't want to wait for death. He was the first Roman emperor who wanted to be a *living* god."

Piper looked up from playing with the baby satyr. "Caligula kind of *is* a minor god now, right? You said he and the two other emperors have been around for thousands of years. So he got what he wanted."

"Partly," I agreed. "But being a *minor* anything isn't enough for Caligula. He always dreamed of replacing one of the Olympians. He toyed with the idea of becoming the new Jupiter or Mars. In the end, he set his sights on being"—I swallowed the sour taste from my mouth—"the new me."

Coach Hedge scratched his goatee. (Hmm. If a goat wears a goatee, is it a man-tee?) "So, what? Caligula kills you, puts on a *Hi, I'm Apollo!* name tag, and walks into Olympus hoping nobody notices?"

"It would be worse than killing me," I said. "He would *consume* my essence, along with the essence of Helios, to make himself the new sun god."

Prickly Pear bristled. "The other Olympians would just *allow* this?"

"The Olympians," I said bitterly, "allowed Zeus to strip me of my powers and toss me to earth. They've done half of Caligula's job *for* him. They won't interfere. As usual, they'll expect heroes to set things right. If Caligula *does* become the new sun god, I will be gone. Permanently gone. That's what Medea has been preparing for with the Burning Maze. It's a giant cooking pot for sun-god soup."

Meg wrinkled her nose. "Gross."

For once, I was in total agreement with her.

Standing in the shadows, Joshua Tree crossed his arms. "So the fires of Helios—that's what's killing our land?"

I spread my hands. "Well, humans aren't helping. But on top of the usual pollution and climate change, yes, the Burning Maze was the tipping point. Everything that's left of the Titan Helios is now coursing through this section

of the Labyrinth under Southern California, slowly turning the top side into a fiery wasteland."

Agave touched the side of her scarred face. When she looked up at me, her stare was as pointed as her collar. "If Medea succeeds, will all the power go into Caligula? Will the maze stop burning and killing us?"

I had never considered cacti a particularly vicious life-form, but as the other dryads studied me, I could imagine them tying me up with a ribbon and a large card that said FOR CALIGULA, FROM NATURE and dropping me on the emperor's doorstep.

"Guys, that won't help," Grover said. "Caligula's responsible for what's happening to us right now. He doesn't care about nature spirits. You really want to give him the full power of a sun god?"

The dryads muttered in reluctant agreement. I made a mental note to send Grover a nice card on Goat Appreciation Day.

"So what do we do?" asked Mellie. "I don't want my son growing up in a burning wasteland."

Meg took off her glasses. "We kill Caligula."

It was jarring, hearing a twelve-year-old girl speak so matter-of-factly about assassination. Even more jarring, I was tempted to agree with her.

"Meg," I said, "that may not be possible. You remember Commodus. He was the weakest of the three emperors, and the best we could do was force him out of Indianapolis. Caligula will be much more powerful, more deeply entrenched."

"Don't care," she muttered. "He hurt my dad. He did…all this." She gestured around at the old cistern.

"What do you mean *all this*?" Joshua asked.

Meg shot a look at me as if to say *Your turn*.

Once again, I explained what I had seen in Meg's memories—Aeithales as it had once been, the legal and financial pressure Caligula must have used to shut down Phillip McCaffrey's work, the way Meg and her father had been forced to flee just before the house was firebombed.

Joshua frowned. "I remember a saguaro named Hercules from the first greenhouse. One of the few who survived the house fire. Old, tough dryad, always in pain from his burns, but he kept clinging to life. He used to talk about a little girl who lived in the house. He said he was waiting for her to return." Joshua turned to Meg in amazement. "That was *you*?"

Meg brushed a tear from her cheek. "He didn't make it?"

Josh shook his head. "He died a few years ago. I'm sorry."

Agave took Meg's hand. "Your father was a great hero," she said. "Clearly, he was doing his best to help plants."

"He was a…botanist," Meg said, pronouncing the word as if she'd just remembered it.

The dryads lowered their heads. Hedge and Grover removed their hats.

"I wonder what your dad's big project was," Piper said, "with those glowing seeds. What did Medea call you…a descendant of Plemnaeus?"

The dryads let out a collective gasp.

"Plemnaeus?" asked Reba. "*The* Plemnaeus? Even in Argentina, we know of him!"

I stared at her. "You do?"

Prickly Pear snorted. "Oh, come on, Apollo! You're a god. Surely you know of the great hero Plemnaeus!"

"Um…" I was tempted to blame my faulty mortal memory, but I was pretty sure I had never heard the name, even when I was a god. "What monster did he slay?"

Aloe edged away from me, as if she did not want to be in the line of fire when the other dryads shot their spines at me.

"Apollo," Reba chided, "a healer god should know better."

"Er, of course," I agreed. "But, um, who exactly—?"

"Typical," Pear muttered. "The killers are remembered as heroes. The growers are forgotten. Except by us nature spirits."

"Plemnaeus was a Greek king," Agave explained. "A noble man, but his children were born under a curse. If any of them cried even once during their infancy, they would die instantly."

I wasn't sure how that made Plemnaeus noble, but I nodded politely. "What happened?"

"He appealed to Demeter," said Joshua. "The goddess herself raised his next son, Orthopolis, so that he would live. In gratitude, Plemnaeus built a temple to Demeter. Ever since, his offspring have dedicated themselves to Demeter's work. They have always been great agriculturalists and botanists."

Agave squeezed Meg's hand. "I understand now why your father was able to build Aeithales. His work must have been special indeed. Not only did he come from a long line of Demeter's heroes, he attracted the personal attention of the goddess, your mother. We are honored that you've come home."

"Home," agreed Prickly Pear.

"Home," Joshua echoed.

Meg blinked back tears.

This seemed like an excellent time for a song circle. I imagined the dryads putting their spiky arms around one another and swaying as they sang "In the Garden." I was even willing to provide ukulele music.

Coach Hedge brought us back to harsh reality.

"That's great." He gave Meg a respectful nod. "Kid, your dad must have been something. But unless he was growing some kind of secret weapon, I don't know how it helps us. We've still got an emperor to kill and a maze to destroy."

“Gleeson…” Mellie chided.

“Hey, am I wrong?”

No one challenged him.

Grover stared disconsolately at his hooves. “What do we do, then?”

“We stick to the plan,” I said. The certainty in my voice seemed to surprise everyone. It definitely surprised me. “We find the Sibyl of Erythraea. She’s more than just bait. She’s the key to everything. I’m sure of it.”

Piper cradled Baby Chuck as he grabbed for her harpy feather. “Apollo, we tried navigating the maze. You saw what happened.”

“Jason Grace made it through,” I said. “He found the Oracle.”

Piper’s expression darkened. “Maybe. But even if you believe Medea, Jason only found the Oracle because Medea *wanted* him to.”

“She mentioned there was another way to navigate the maze,” I said. “The emperor’s shoes. Apparently, they let Caligula walk through safely. We need those shoes. That’s what the prophecy meant: *walk the path in thine own enemy’s boots*.”

Meg wiped her nose. “So you’re saying we need to find Caligula’s place and steal his shoes. While we’re there, can’t we just kill him?”

She asked this casually, like *Can we stop by Target on the way home?*

Hedge wagged his finger at McCaffrey. “See, now *that’s* a plan. I like this girl.”

“Friends,” I said, wishing I had some of Piper’s charmspeaking skills, “Caligula’s been alive for thousands of years. He’s a minor god. We don’t know *how* to kill him so he stays dead. We also don’t know how to destroy the maze, and we certainly don’t want to make things worse by unleashing all that godly heat into the upper world. Our priority has to be the Sibyl.”

“Because it’s *your* priority?” Pear grumbled.

I resisted the urge to yell *Duh!*

“Either way,” I said, “to learn the emperor’s location, we need to consult Jason Grace. Medea told us the Oracle gave him information on how to find Caligula. Piper, will you take us to Jason?”

Piper frowned. Baby Chuck had her finger in his tiny fist and was moving it dangerously close to his mouth.

“Jason’s living at a boarding school in Pasadena,” she said at last. “I don’t know if he’ll listen to me. I don’t know if he’ll help. But we can try. My friend Annabeth always says information is the most powerful weapon.”

Grover nodded. “I never argue with Annabeth.”

“It’s settled, then,” I said. “Tomorrow we continue our quest by busting Jason Grace out of school.”

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21

When life gives you seeds
Plant them in dry rocky soil
I'm an optimist

I slept poorly.

Are you shocked? I was shocked.

I dreamed of my most famous Oracle, Delphi, though alas, it was not during the good old days when I would have been welcomed with flowers, kisses, candy, and my usual VIP table at Chez Oracle.

Instead, it was modern Delphi—devoid of priests and worshippers, filled instead with the hideous stench of Python, my old enemy, who had reclaimed his ancient lair. His rotten-egg/rancid-meat smell was impossible to forget.

I stood deep in the caverns, where no mortal ever trod. In the distance, two voices conversed, their bodies lost in the swirling volcanic vapors.

"It's under control," said the first, in the high nasal tones of Emperor Nero.

The second speaker growled, a sound like a chain pulling an ancient roller coaster uphill.

"Very little has been *under control* since Apollo fell to earth," said Python.

His cold voice sent ripples of revulsion through my body. I couldn't see him, but I could imagine his baleful amber eyes flecked with gold, his enormous dragon form, his wicked claws.

"You have a great opportunity," Python continued. "Apollo is weak. He is mortal. He is accompanied by your own stepdaughter. How is it that he is not yet dead?"

Nero's voice tightened. "We had a difference of opinion, my colleagues and I. Commodus—"

"Is a fool," Python hissed, "who only cares about spectacle. We both

know that. And your great-uncle, Caligula?"

Nero hesitated. "He insisted…He has need of Apollo's power. He wants the former god to meet his fate in a very, ah, particular way."

Python's massive bulk shifted in the darkness—I heard his scales rubbing against the stone. "I know Caligula's plan. I wonder who is controlling whom? You have assured me—"

"Yes," Nero snapped. "Meg McCaffrey *will* come back to me. She will serve me yet. Apollo will die, as I promised."

"If Caligula succeeds," Python mused, "then the balance of power will change. I would prefer to back *you*, of course, but if a new sun god rises in the west—"

"You and I have a deal," Nero snarled. "You support me once the Triumvirate controls—"

"—all means of prophecy," Python agreed. "But it does not as yet. You lost Dodona to the Greek demigods. The Cave of Trophonius has been destroyed. I understand the Romans have been alerted to Caligula's plans for Camp Jupiter. I have no wish to rule the world alone. But if you fail me, if I have to kill Apollo myself—"

"I will hold up my side of the bargain," Nero said. "You hold up yours."

Python rasped in an evil approximation of a laugh. "We will see. The next few days should be very instructive."

I woke with a gasp.

I found myself alone and shivering in the Cistern. Piper's and Meg's sleeping bags were empty. Above, the sky shone a brilliant blue. I wanted to believe this meant the wildfires had been brought under control. More likely it meant the winds had simply shifted.

My skin had healed overnight, though I still felt like I'd been dipped in liquid aluminum. With a minimum of grimacing and yelping, I managed to get dressed, get my bow, quiver, and ukulele, and climb the ramp to the hillside.

I spotted Piper at the base of the hill, talking with Grover at the Bedrossian-mobile. I scanned the ruins and saw Meg crouching by the first collapsed greenhouse.

Thinking of my dream, I burned with anger. Had I still been a god, I would have roared my displeasure and cracked a new Grand Canyon across the desert. As it was, I could only clench my fists until my nails cut my palms.

It was bad enough that a trio of evil emperors wanted my Oracles, my life, my very essence. It was bad enough that my ancient enemy Python had retaken Delphi and was waiting for my death. But the idea of Nero using Meg as a pawn in this game…No. I told myself I would never let Nero get Meg in

his clutches again. My young friend was strong. She was striving to break free of her stepfather's vile influence. She and I had been through too much together for her to go back.

Still, Nero's words unsettled me*: Meg McCaffrey will come back to me. She will serve me yet.*

I wondered…if my own father, Zeus, appeared to me just then and offered me a way back to Olympus, what price would I be willing to pay? Would I leave Meg to her fate? Would I abandon the demigods and satyrs and dryads who had become my comrades? Would I forget about all the terrible things Zeus had done to me over the centuries and swallow my pride, just so I could regain my place in Olympus, knowing full well I would still be under Zeus's thumb?

I tamped down those questions. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answers.

I joined Meg at the collapsed greenhouse. "Good morning."

She did not look up. She'd been digging through the wreckage. Half-melted polycarbonate walls had been turned over and tossed aside. Her hands were dirty from clawing at the soil. Near her sat a grimy glass peanut butter jar, the rusty lid removed and lying next to it. Cupped in her palm were some greenish pebbles.

I sucked in my breath.

No, they weren't pebbles. In Meg's hand lay seven coin-size hexagons—green seeds exactly like the ones in the memories she'd shared.

"How?" I asked.

She glanced up. She wore teal camouflage today, which made her look like an entirely different dangerous and scary little girl. Someone had cleaned her glasses (Meg never did), so I could see her eyes. They glinted as hard and clear as the rhinestones in her frames.

"The seeds were buried," she said. "I…had a dream about them. The saguaro Hercules did it, put them in that jar right before he died. He was saving the seeds…for me, for when it was time."

I wasn't sure what to say. *Congratulations. What nice seeds.* Honestly, I didn't know much about how plants grew. I did notice, however, that the seeds weren't glowing as they had in Meg's memories.

"Do you think they're still, uh, good?" I asked.

"Going to find out," she said. "Going to plant them."

I looked around at the desert hillside. "You mean here? Now?"

"Yep. It's time."

How could she know that? I also didn't see how planting a few seeds would make a difference when Caligula's maze was causing half of California to burn.

On the other hand, we were off on another quest today, hoping to find

Caligula's palace, with no guarantee we would come back alive. I supposed there was no time like the present. And if it made Meg feel better, why not?

"How can I help?" I asked.

"Poke holes." Then she added, as if I might need extra guidance, "In the dirt."

I accomplished this with an arrow tip, making seven small impressions in the barren, rocky soil. I couldn't help thinking that these seed holes didn't look like very comfortable places to grow.

While Meg placed her green hexagons in their new homes, she directed me to get water from the Cistern's well.

"It has to be from there," she warned. "A big cupful."

A few minutes later I returned with a Big Hombre–size plastic cup from Enchiladas del Rey. Meg drizzled the water over her newly planted friends.

I waited for something dramatic to happen. In Meg's presence, I'd gotten used to chia seed explosions, demon peach babies, and instant walls of strawberries.

The dirt did not move.

"Guess we wait," Meg said.

She hugged her knees and scanned the horizon.

The morning sun blazed in the east. It had risen today, as always, but no thanks to me. It didn't care if I was driving the sun chariot, or if Helios was raging in the tunnels under Los Angeles. No matter what humans believed, the cosmos kept turning, and the sun stayed on course. Under different circumstances, I would have found that reassuring. Now I found the sun's indifference both cruel and insulting. In only a few days, Caligula might become a solar deity. Under such villainous leadership, you might think the sun would refuse to rise or set. But shockingly, disgustingly, day and night would continue as they always had.

"Where is she?" Meg asked.

I blinked. "Who?"

"If my family is so important to her, thousands of years of blessings, or whatever, why hasn't she ever…?"

She waved at the vast desert, as if to say *So much real estate, so little Demeter*.

She was asking why her mother had never appeared to her, why Demeter had allowed Caligula to destroy her father's work, why she'd let Nero raise her in his poisonous imperial household in New York.

I couldn't answer Meg's questions. Or rather, as a former god, I could think of several possible answers, but none that would make Meg feel better: *Demeter was too busy watching the crop situation in Tanzania. Demeter got distracted inventing new breakfast cereals. Demeter forgot you existed.*

"I don't know, Meg," I admitted. "But this…" I pointed at the seven tiny

wet circles in the dirt. “This is the sort of thing your mother would be proud of. Growing plants in an impossible place. Stubbornly insisting on creating life. It’s ridiculously optimistic. Demeter would approve.”

Meg studied me as if trying to decide whether to thank me or hit me. I’d gotten used to that look.

“Let’s go,” she decided. “Maybe the seeds will sprout while we’re gone.”

The three of us piled into the Bedrossian-mobile: Meg, Piper, and me.

Grover had decided to stay behind—supposedly to rally the demoralized dryads, but I think he was simply exhausted from his series of near-death excursions with Meg and me. Coach Hedge volunteered to accompany us, but Mellie quickly un-volunteered him. As for the dryads, none seemed anxious to be our plant shields after what had happened to Money Maker and Agave. I couldn’t blame them.

At least Piper agreed to drive. If we got pulled over for possession of a stolen vehicle, she could charmspeak her way out of being arrested. With my luck, I would spend all day in jail, and Lester’s face would *not* look good in a mug shot.

We retraced our route from yesterday—the same heat-blasted terrain, the same smoke-stained skies, the same clogged traffic. Living the California dream.

None of us felt much like talking. Piper kept her eyes fixed on the road, probably thinking about a reunion she did not want with an ex-boyfriend she had left on awkward terms. (Oh, boy, I could relate.)

Meg traced the swirls on her teal camo pants. I imagined she was reflecting on her father’s final botany project and why Caligula had found it so threatening. It seemed unbelievable that Meg’s entire life had been altered by seven green seeds. Then again, she was a child of Demeter. With the goddess of plants, insignificant-looking things could be very significant.

The smallest seedlings, Demeter often told me, *grow into century oaks.*

As for me, I had no shortage of problems to think about.

Python awaited. I knew instinctively that I would have to face him one day. If by some miracle I survived the emperors’ various plots on my life, if I defeated the Triumvirate and freed the four other Oracles and single-handedly set everything right in the mortal world, I would *still* have to find a way to wrest control of Delphi from my most ancient enemy. Only then might Zeus let me become a god again. Because Zeus was just that awesome. Thanks, Dad.

In the meantime, I had to deal with Caligula. I would have to foil his plan to make me the secret ingredient in his sun-god soup. And I would have to do this while having no godly powers at my disposal. My archery skills had

deteriorated. My singing and playing weren't worth olive pits. Divine strength? Charisma? Light? Fire power? All gauges read EMPTY.

My most humiliating thought: Medea would capture me, try to strip away my divine power, and find I didn't have any left.

What is this? she would scream. *There's nothing here but Lester!*

Then she would kill me anyway.

As I contemplated these happy possibilities, we wound our way through the Pasadena Valley.

"I've never liked this city," I murmured. "It makes me think of game shows, tawdry parades, and drunk washed-up starlets with spray-on tans."

Piper coughed. "FYI, Jason's mom was from here. She died here, in a car accident."

"I'm sorry. What did she do?"

"She was a drunk washed-up starlet with a spray-on tan."

"Ah." I waited for the sting of embarrassment to fade. It took several miles. "So why would Jason want to go to school here?"

Piper gripped the wheel. "After we broke up, he transferred to an all-boys boarding school up in the hills. You'll see. I guess he wanted something different, something quiet and out-of-the-way. No drama."

"He'll be happy to see *us*, then," Meg muttered, staring out the window.

We made our way into the hills above town, the houses getting more and more impressive as we gained altitude. Even in Mansion Land, though, trees had started to die. Manicured lawns were turning brown around the edges. When water shortages and above-average temperatures affected the upscale neighborhoods, you *knew* things were serious. The rich and the gods were always the last to suffer.

At the crest of a hill stood Jason's school—a sprawling campus of blond-brick buildings interlaced with garden courtyards and walkways shaded by acacia trees. The sign in front, done in subtle bronze letters on a low brick wall, read: EDGARTON DAY AND BOARDING SCHOOL.

We parked the Escalade on a nearby residential street, using the Piper McLean if-it's-towed-we'll-just-borrow-another-car strategy.

A security guard stood at the front gates of the school, but Piper told him we were allowed to go inside, and the guard, with a look of great confusion, agreed that we were allowed to go inside.

The classrooms all opened onto the courtyards. Student lockers lined the breezeways. It was not a school design that would have worked in, say, Milwaukee during blizzard season, but in Southern California it spoke to just how much the locals took their mild, consistent weather for granted. I doubted the buildings even had air-conditioning. If Caligula continued cooking gods in his Burning Maze, the Edgarton school board might have to rethink that.

Despite Piper's insistence that she had distanced herself from Jason's life,

she had his schedule memorized. She led us right to his fourth-period classroom. Peering through the windows, I saw a dozen students—all young men in blue blazers, dress shirts, red ties, gray slacks, and shiny shoes, like junior business executives. At the front of the class, in a director's chair, a bearded teacher in a tweed suit was reading from a paperback copy of *Julius Caesar*.

Ugh. Bill Shakespeare. I mean, yes, he was good. But even *he* would've been horrified at the number of hours mortals spent drilling his plays into the heads of bored teenagers, and the sheer number of pipes, tweed jackets, marble busts, and bad dissertations even his *least* favorite plays had inspired. Meanwhile, Christopher Marlowe got the short end of the Elizabethan stick. Kit had been *much* more gorgeous.

But I digress.

Piper knocked on the door and poked her head in. Suddenly the young men no longer looked bored. Piper said something to the teacher, who blinked a few times, then waved *go ahead* to a young man in the middle row.

A moment later, Jason Grace joined us in the breezeway.

I had only seen him a few times before—once when he was a praetor at Camp Jupiter; once when he had visited Delos; then shortly afterward, when we had fought side by side against the giants at the Parthenon.

He'd fought well enough, but I can't say that I'd paid him any special attention. In those days, I was still a god. Jason was just another hero in the *Argo II*'s demigod crew.

Now, in his school uniform, he looked quite impressive. His blond hair was cropped short. His blue eyes flashed behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses. Jason closed the classroom door behind him, tucked his books under his arm, and forced a smile, a little white scar twitching at the corner of his lip. "Piper. Hey."

I wondered how Piper managed to look so calm. I'd gone through many complicated breakups. They never got easier, and Piper didn't have the advantage of being able to turn her ex into a tree or simply wait until his short mortal life was over before returning to earth.

"Hey, yourself," she said, just a hint of strain in her voice. "This is—"

"Meg McCaffrey," Jason said. "And Apollo. I've been waiting for you guys."

He didn't sound terribly excited about it. He said it the way someone might say *I've been waiting for the results from my emergency brain scan.*

Meg sized up Jason as if she found his glasses far inferior to her own. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Jason peered down the breezeway in each direction. "Let's go back to my dorm room. We're not safe out here."

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22

For my school project
I made this pagan temple
Monopoly board

WE had to get past a teacher and two hall monitors, but thanks to Piper's charmspeak, they all agreed that it was perfectly normal for the four of us (including two females) to stroll into the dormitory during classroom hours.

Once we reached Jason's room, Piper stopped at the door. "Define *not safe*."

Jason peered over her shoulder. "Monsters have infiltrated the faculty. I'm keeping an eye on the humanities teacher. Pretty sure she's an empousa. I already had to slay my AP Calculus teacher, because he was a blemmyae."

Coming from a mortal, such talk would have been labeled homicidally paranoid. Coming from a demigod, it was a description of an average week.

"Blemmyae, huh?" Meg reappraised Jason, as if deciding that his glasses might not be so bad. "I hate blemmyae."

Jason smirked. "Come on in."

I would've called his room *spartan*, but I had seen the bedrooms of actual Spartans. They would have found Jason's dorm ridiculously comfortable.

The fifty-foot-square space had a bookcase, a bed, a desk, and a closet. The only luxury was an open window that looked out across the canyons, filling the room with the warm scent of hyacinth. (Did it *have* to be hyacinth? My heart always breaks when I smell that fragrance, even after thousands of years.)

On Jason's wall hung a framed picture of his sister Thalia smiling at the camera, a bow slung across her back, her short dark hair blown sideways by the wind. Except for her dazzling blue eyes, she looked nothing like her brother.

Then again, neither of them looked anything like me, and as the son of

Zeus, I was technically their brother. And I had flirted with Thalia, which… Eww. Curse you, Father, for having so many children! It made dating a true minefield over the millennia.

"Your sister says hello, by the way," I said.

Jason's eyes brightened. "You saw her?"

I launched into an explanation of our time in Indianapolis: the Waystation, the emperor Commodus, the Hunters of Artemis rappelling into the football stadium to rescue us. Then I backed up and explained the Triumvirate, and all the miserable things that had happened to me since emerging from that Manhattan dumpster.

Meanwhile, Piper sat cross-legged on the floor, her back against the wall, as far as possible from the more comfortable sitting option of the bed. Meg stood at Jason's desk, examining some sort of school project—foam core studded with little plastic boxes, perhaps to represent buildings.

When I casually mentioned that Leo was alive and well and presently on a mission to Camp Jupiter, all the electrical outlets in the room sparked. Jason looked at Piper, stunned.

"I know," she said. "After all we went through."

"I can't even…" Jason sat heavily on his bed. "I don't know whether to laugh or yell."

"Don't limit yourself," grumbled Piper. "Do both."

Meg called from the desk, "Hey, what is this?"

Jason flushed. "A personal project."

"It's Temple Hill," Piper offered, her tone carefully neutral. "At Camp Jupiter."

I took a closer look. Piper was right. I recognized the layout of the temples and shrines where Camp Jupiter demigods honored the ancient deities. Each building was represented by a small plastic box glued to the board, the names of the shrines hand-labeled on the foam core. Jason had even marked lines of elevation, showing the hill's topographical levels.

I found my temple: APOLLO, symbolized by a red plastic building. It was not nearly as nice as the real thing, with its golden roof and platinum filigree designs, but I didn't want to be critical.

"Are these Monopoly houses?" Meg asked.

Jason shrugged. "I kinda used whatever I had—the green houses and red hotels."

I squinted at the board. I hadn't descended in glory to Temple Hill for quite some time, but the display seemed more crowded than the actual hill. There were at least twenty small tokens I didn't recognize.

I leaned in and read some of the handwritten labels. "Kymopoleia? My goodness, I haven't thought about her in centuries! Why did the Romans build her a shrine?"

“They haven’t yet,” Jason said. “But I made her a promise. She…helped us out on our voyage to Athens.”

The way he said that, I decided he meant *she agreed not to kill us,* which was much more in keeping with Kymopoleia’s character.

“I told her I’d make sure none of the gods and goddesses were forgotten,” Jason continued, “either at Camp Jupiter or Camp Half-Blood. I’d see to it they *all* had some sort of shrine at both camps.”

Piper glanced at me. “He’s done a ton of work on his designs. You should see his sketchbook.”

Jason frowned, clearly unsure whether Piper was praising him or criticizing him. The smell of burning electricity thickened in the air.

“Well,” he said at last, “the designs won’t win any awards. I’ll need Annabeth to help with the actual blueprints.”

“Honoring the gods is a noble endeavor,” I said. “You should be proud.”

Jason did not look proud. He looked worried. I remembered what Medea had said about the Oracle’s news: *The truth was enough to break Jason Grace*. He did not appear to be broken. Then again, I did not appear to be Apollo.

Meg leaned closer to the display. “How come Potina gets a house but Quirinus gets a hotel?”

“There’s not really any logic to it,” Jason admitted. “I just used the tokens to mark positions.”

I frowned. I’d been fairly sure I’d gotten a hotel, as opposed to Ares’s house, because I was more important.

Meg tapped her mother’s token. “Demeter is cool. You should put the cool gods next to her.”

“Meg,” I chided, “we can’t arrange the gods by *coolness*. That would lead to too many fights.”

Besides, I thought, *everyone would want to be next to me*. Then I wondered bitterly if that would still be true when and if I made it back to Olympus. Would my time as Lester mark me forever as an immortal dweeb?

“Anyway,” Piper interrupted. “The reason we came: the Burning Maze.”

She didn’t accuse Jason of holding back information. She didn’t tell him what Medea had said. She simply studied his face, waiting to see how he would respond.

Jason laced his fingers. He stared at the sheathed *gladius* propped against the wall next to a lacrosse stick and a tennis racket. (These fancy boarding schools really offered the full range of extracurricular options.)

“I didn’t tell you everything,” he admitted.

Piper’s silence felt more powerful than her charmspeaking.

“I—I reached the Sibyl,” Jason continued. “I can’t even explain *how*. I

just stumbled into this big room with a pool of fire. The Sibyl was…standing across from me, on this stone platform, her arms chained with some fiery shackles."

"Herophile," I said. "Her name is Herophile."

Jason blinked, as if he could still feel the heat and cinders of the room.

"I wanted to free her," he said. "Obviously. But she told me it wasn't possible. It had to be…" He gestured at me. "She told me it was a trap. The whole maze. For Apollo. She told me you'd eventually come find me. You and her—Meg. Herophile said there was nothing I could do except give you help if you asked for it. She said to tell you, Apollo—you have to rescue her."

I knew all this, of course. I had seen and heard as much in my dreams. But hearing it from Jason, in the waking world, made it worse.

Piper rested her head against the wall. She stared at a water stain on the ceiling. "What else did Herophile say?"

Jason's face tightened. "Pipes—Piper, look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It's just—"

"What else did she say?" Piper repeated.

Jason looked at Meg, then at me, maybe for moral support.

"The Sibyl told me where I could find the emperor," he said. "Well, more or less. She said Apollo would need the information. He would need…a pair of shoes. I know that doesn't make much sense."

"I'm afraid it does," I said.

Meg ran her fingers along the plastic rooftops of the map. "Can we kill the emperor while we're stealing his shoes? Did the Sibyl say anything about that?"

Jason shook his head. "She just said that Piper and I…we couldn't do anything more by ourselves. It had to be Apollo. If we tried…it would be too dangerous."

Piper laughed drily. She raised her hands as if making an offering to the water stain.

"Jason, we've been through literally *everything* together. I can't even count how many dangers we've faced, how many times we've almost died. Now you're telling me you lied to me to, what, protect me? To keep me from going after Caligula?"

"I knew you would have done it," he murmured. "No matter what the Sibyl said."

"Then that would've been *my* choice," Piper said. "Not yours."

He nodded miserably. "And I would've insisted on going with you, no matter the risk. But the way things have been between us…" He shrugged. "Working as a team has been hard. I thought—I decided to wait until Apollo found me. I messed up, not telling you. I'm sorry."

He stared at his Temple Hill display, as if trying to figure out where to

place a shrine to the god of feeling horrible about failed relationships. (Oh, wait. He already had one. It was for Aphrodite, Piper's mom.)

Piper took a deep breath. "This isn't about you and me, Jason. Satyrs and dryads are dying. Caligula's planning to turn himself into a new sun god. Tonight's the new moon, and Camp Jupiter is facing some kind of huge threat. Meanwhile, Medea is in that maze, throwing around Titan fire—"

"Medea?" Jason sat up straight. The lightbulb in his desk lamp burst, raining glass across his diorama. "Back up. What's Medea got to do with this? What do you mean about the new moon and Camp Jupiter?"

I thought Piper might refuse to share the information, just for spite, but she didn't. She gave Jason the lowdown about the Indiana prophecy that predicted bodies filling the Tiber. Then she explained Medea's cooking project with her grandfather.

Jason looked like our father had just hit him with a thunderbolt. "I had no idea."

Meg crossed her arms. "So, you going to help us or what?"

Jason studied her, no doubt unsure what to make of this scary little girl in teal camouflage.

"Of—of course," he said. "We'll need a car. And I'll need an excuse to leave campus." He looked hopefully at Piper.

She got to her feet. "Fine. I'll go talk to the office. Meg, come with me, just in case we run into that empousa. We'll meet you boys at the front gate. And Jason—?"

"Yeah?"

"If you're holding anything else back—"

"Right. I—I get it."

Piper turned and marched out of the room. Meg gave me a look like *You sure about this?*

"Go on," I told her. "I'll help Jason get ready."

Once the girls had left, I turned to confront Jason Grace, one son of Zeus/Jupiter to another.

"All right," I said. "What did the Sibyl *really* tell you?"

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23

It's a beautiful
Day in the neighborhood— Wait
Actually, it's not

JASON took his time responding.

He removed his jacket, hung it in the closet. He undid his tie and folded it over the coat hook. I had a flashback to my old friend Fred Rogers, the children's television host, who radiated the same calm centeredness when hanging up his work clothes. Fred used to let me crash on his sofa whenever I'd had a hard day of poetry-godding. He'd offer me a plate of cookies and a glass of milk, then serenade me with his songs until I felt better. I was especially fond of "It's You I Like." Oh, I missed that mortal!

Finally, Jason strapped on his gladius. With his glasses, dress shirt, slacks, loafers, and sword, he looked less like Mister Rogers and more like a well-armed paralegal.

"What makes you think I'm holding back?" he asked.

"Please," I said. "Don't try to be evasively prophetic with the god of evasive prophecies."

Jason sighed. He rolled up his shirtsleeves, revealing the Roman tattoo on the inside of his forearm—the lightning bolt emblem of our father. "First of all, it wasn't exactly a prophecy. It was more like a series of quiz show questions."

"Yes. Herophile delivers information that way."

"And you know how prophecies are. Even when the Oracle is friendly, they can be hard to interpret."

"Jason…"

"Fine," he relented. "The Sibyl said…She told me if Piper and I went after the emperor, one of us would die."

Die. The word landed between us with a thud, like a large, gutted fish.

I waited for an explanation. Jason stared at his foam core Temple Hill as if trying to bring it to life by sheer force of will.

"Die," I repeated.

"Yeah."

"Not *disappear*, not *wouldn't come back*, not *suffer defeat*."

"Nope. *Die*. Or more accurately, *three letters, starts with* D."

"Not *dad*, then," I suggested. "Or *dog*."

One fine blond eyebrow crept above the rim of his glasses. "*If you seek out the emperor, one of you will dog?* No, Apollo, the word was *die*."

"Still, that could mean many things. It could mean a trip to the Underworld. It could mean a death such as Leo suffered, where you pop right back to life. It could mean—"

"Now *you're* being evasive," Jason said. "The Sibyl meant death. Final. Real. No replays. You had to be there. The way she said it. Unless you happen to have an extra vial of the physician's cure in your pockets…"

He knew very well I did not. The physician's cure, which had brought Leo Valdez back to life, was only available from my son Asclepius, god of medicine. And since Asclepius wanted to avoid an all-out war with Hades, he rarely gave out free samples. As in never. Leo had been the first lucky recipient in four thousand years. He would likely be the last.

"Still…" I fumbled for alternate theories and loopholes. I hated thinking of permanent death. As an immortal, I was a conscientious objector. As good as your afterlife experience might be (and most of them were *not* good), life was better. The warmth of the actual sun, the vibrant colors of the upper world, the cuisine…really, even Elysium had nothing to compare.

Jason's stare was unrelenting. I suspected that in the weeks since his talk with Herophile, he had run every scenario. He was well past the *bargaining* stage in dealing with this prophecy. He had accepted that death meant death, the way Piper McLean had accepted that Oklahoma meant Oklahoma.

I didn't like that. Jason's calmness again reminded me of Fred Rogers, but in an exasperating way. How could anyone be so accepting and levelheaded all the time? Sometimes I just wanted him to get mad, to scream and throw his loafers across the room.

"Let's assume you're correct," I said. "You didn't tell Piper the truth because—?"

"You know what happened to her dad." Jason studied the calluses on his hands, proof he had not let his sword skills atrophy. "Last year when we saved him from the fire giant on Mount Diablo…Mr. McLean's mind wasn't in good shape. Now, with all the stress of the bankruptcy and everything else, can you imagine what would happen if he lost his daughter too?"

I recalled the disheveled movie star wandering his driveway, searching for

imaginary coins. “Yes, but you can’t *know* how the prophecy will unfold.”

“I can’t let it unfold with Piper dying. She and her dad are scheduled to leave town at the end of the week. She’s actually…I don’t know if *excited* is the right word, but she’s relieved to get out of LA. Ever since I’ve known her, the thing she’s wanted most is more time with her dad. Now they have a chance to start over. She can help her dad find some peace. Maybe find some peace herself.”

His voice caught—perhaps with guilt, or regret, or fear.

“You wanted to get her safely out of town,” I deduced. “Then you planned to find the emperor yourself.”

Jason shrugged. “Well, with you and Meg. I knew you’d be coming to find me. Herophile said so. If you’d just waited another week—”

“Then what?” I demanded. “You would’ve let us lead you cheerily off to your death? How would *that* have affected Piper’s peace of mind, once she found out?”

Jason’s ears reddened. It struck me just how young he was—no more than seventeen. Older than my mortal form, yes, but not by much. This young man had lost his mother. He had survived the harsh training of Lupa the wolf goddess. He’d grown up with the discipline of the Twelfth Legion at Camp Jupiter. He’d fought Titans and giants. He’d helped save the world at least twice. But by mortal standards, he was barely an adult. He wasn’t old enough to vote or drink.

Despite all his experiences, was it fair of me to expect him to think logically, and consider everyone else’s feelings with perfect clarity, while pondering his own death?

I tried to soften my tone. “You don’t want Piper to die. I understand that. She wouldn’t want *you* to die. But avoiding prophecies never works. And keeping secrets from friends, especially deadly secrets…that *really* never works. It’ll be our job to face Caligula together, steal that homicidal maniac’s shoes, and get away *without* any five-letter words that start with *D*.”

The scar ticked at the corner of Jason’s mouth. “Donut?”

“You’re horrible,” I said, but some of the tension dissolved between my shoulder blades. “Are you ready?”

He glanced at the photo of his sister Thalia, then at the model of Temple Hill. “If anything happens to me—”

“Stop.”

“If it does, if I can’t keep my promise to Kymopoleia, would you take my mock-up design to Camp Jupiter? The sketchbooks for new temples at both camps—they’re right there on the shelf.”

“You’ll take them yourself,” I insisted. “Your new shrines will honor the gods. It’s too worthy a project not to succeed.”

He picked a shard of lightbulb glass off the roof of the Zeus hotel token. "*Worthy* doesn't always matter. Like what happened to you. Have you talked to Dad since…?"

He had the decency not to elaborate: *Since you landed in the garbage as a flabby sixteen-year-old with no redeeming qualities.*

I swallowed back the taste of copper. From the depths of my small mortal mind, my father's words rumbled: *YOUR FAULT. YOUR PUNISHMENT.*

"Zeus hasn't spoken to me since I became mortal," I said. "Before that, my memory is fuzzy. I remember the battle last summer at the Parthenon. I remember Zeus zapping me. After that, until the moment I woke up plummeting through the sky in January—it's a blank."

"I know *that* feeling, having six months of your life taken away." He gave me a pained look. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"What could you have done?"

"I mean at the Parthenon. I tried to talk sense into Zeus. I told him he was wrong to punish you. He wouldn't listen."

I stared at him blankly, whatever remained of my natural eloquence clogged in my throat. Jason Grace had done *what*?

Zeus had many children, which meant I had many half brothers and half sisters. Except for my twin, Artemis, I'd never felt close to any of them. Certainly, I'd *never* had a brother defend me in front of Father. My Olympian brethren were more likely to deflect Zeus's fury by yelling *Apollo did it!*

This young demigod had stood up for me. He'd had no reason to do so. He barely knew me. Yet he'd risked his own life and faced the wrath of Zeus.

My first thought was to scream *ARE YOU INSANE?*

Then more appropriate words came to me. "Thank you."

Jason took me by the shoulders—not out of anger, or in a clinging way, but as a brother. "Promise me one thing. Whatever happens, when you get back to Olympus, when you're a god again, *remember*. Remember what it's like to be human."

A few weeks ago, I would have scoffed. *Why would I want to remember any of this?*

At best, if I were lucky enough to reclaim my divine throne, I would recall this wretched experience like a scary B-movie that had finally ended. I would walk out of the cinema into the sunlight, thinking *Phew! Glad that's over.*

Now, however, I had some inkling of what Jason meant. I had learned a lot about human frailty and human strength. I felt…different toward mortals, having been one of them. If nothing else, it would provide me with some excellent inspiration for new song lyrics!

I was reluctant to promise anything, though. I was already living under the curse of *one* broken oath. At Camp Half-Blood, I had rashly sworn on the

River Styx not to use my archery or music skills until I was a god again. Then I had quickly reneged. Ever since, my skills had deteriorated.

I was sure the vengeful spirit of the River Styx wasn't done with me. I could almost feel her scowling at me from the Underworld: *What right do you have to promise anything to anyone, oath-breaker?*

But how could I not try? It was the least I could do for this brave mortal who had stood up for me when no one else would.

"I promise," I told Jason. "I will try my utmost to remember my human experience, as long as *you* promise to tell Piper the truth about the prophecy."

Jason patted my shoulders. "Deal. Speaking of which, the girls are probably waiting."

"One more thing," I blurted out. "About Piper. It's just…you seem like such a good power couple. Did you really—did you break up with her to make it easier for her to leave LA?"

Jason stared at me with those azure eyes. "Did she tell you that?"

"No," I admitted. "But Mellie seemed, ah, *upset* with you."

Jason considered. "I'm okay with Mellie blaming me. It's probably better."

"Do you mean it's not true?"

In Jason's eyes, I saw just a hint of desolation—like wildfire smoke momentarily obliterating a blue sky. I remembered Medea's words: *The truth was enough to break Jason Grace.*

"Piper ended it," he said quietly. "That was months ago, way before the Burning Maze. Now, come on. Let's go find Caligula."

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24

Ah, Santa Barbara!
Famed for surfing! Fish tacos!
And crazy Romans!

ALAS for us and Mr. Bedrossian, there was no sign of the Cadillac Escalade on the street where we'd parked.

"We've been towed," Piper announced casually, as if this was a regular occurrence for her.

She returned to the school's front office. A few minutes later, she emerged from the front gates driving Edgarton's green-and-gold van.

She rolled down the window. "Hey, kids. Want to go on a field trip?"

As we pulled away, Jason glanced nervously in the passenger-side rearview mirror, perhaps worried the security guard would give chase and demand we get signed permission slips before leaving campus to kill a Roman emperor. But no one followed us.

"Where to?" Piper asked when we reached the highway.

"Santa Barbara," Jason said.

Piper frowned, as if this answer was only slightly more surprising than *Uzbekistan*. "Okay."

She followed the signs for Highway 101 West.

For once, I hoped traffic would be jammed. I was not in a hurry to see Caligula. Instead, the roads were nearly empty. It was like the Southern California freeway system had heard me complaining and was now out for revenge.

Oh, go right ahead, Apollo! Highway 101 seemed to say. *We estimate an easy commute to your humiliating death!*

Next to me in the backseat, Meg drummed her fingers on her knees. "How much farther?"

I was only vaguely familiar with Santa Barbara. I hoped Jason would tell

us it was far away—just past the North Pole, maybe. Not that I wanted to be stuck in a van with Meg that long, but at least then we could stop by Camp Jupiter and pick up a squadron of heavily armed demigods.

"About two hours," Jason said, dashing my hopes. "Northwest, along the coast. We're going to Stearns Wharf."

Piper turned to him. "You've been there?"

"I…Yeah. Just scouting the place with Tempest."

"Tempest?" I asked.

"His horse," Piper said, then to Jason: "You went scouting there alone?"

"Well, Tempest is a ventus," Jason said, ignoring Piper's question.

Meg stopped drumming her knees. "Like those windy things Medea had?"

"Except Tempest is friendly," Jason said. "I kind of…not tamed him, exactly, but we made friends. He'll show up when I call, usually, and let me ride him."

"A wind horse." Meg pondered the idea, no doubt weighing its merits against her own demonic diaper-wearing peach baby. "I guess that's cool."

"Back to the question," Piper said. "Why did you decide to scout Stearns Wharf?"

Jason looked so uncomfortable I feared he might blow out the van's electrical systems.

"The Sibyl," he said at last. "She told me I would find Caligula there. It's one of the places where he stops."

Piper tilted her head. "Where he *stops*?"

"His palace isn't a palace, exactly," Jason said. "We're looking for a boat."

My stomach dropped out and took the nearest exit back toward Palm Springs. "Ah," I said.

"Ah?" Meg asked. "Ah, what?"

"Ah, that makes sense," I said. "In ancient times, Caligula was notorious for his pleasure barges—huge floating palaces with bathhouses, theaters, rotating statues, racetracks, thousands of slaves…."

I remembered how disgusted Poseidon had been, watching Caligula tootle around the Bay of Baiae, though I think Poseidon was just jealous *his* palace didn't have rotating statues.

"Anyway," I said, "that explains why you've had trouble locating him. He can move from harbor to harbor at will."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "When I scouted, he wasn't there. I guess the Sibyl meant I'd find him at Stearns Wharf when I was *supposed* to find him. Which, I guess, is today." He shifted in his seat, leaning as far away as possible from Piper. "Speaking of the Sibyl…there's another detail I didn't share with you about the prophecy."

He told Piper the truth about the three-letter word that began with *D* and

was not *dog*.

She took the news surprisingly well. She did not hit him. She didn't raise her voice. She merely listened, then remained silent for another mile or so.

At last, she shook her head. "That's quite a detail."

"I should've told you," Jason said.

"Um, yeah." She twisted the steering wheel exactly the way one would break the neck of a chicken. "Still…if I'm being honest? In your position, I might've done the same thing. I wouldn't want you to die either."

Jason blinked. "Does that mean you're not mad?"

"I'm furious."

"Oh."

"Furious, but also empathetic."

"Right."

It struck me how easily they talked together, even about difficult things, and how well they seemed to understand each other. I remembered Piper saying how frantic she'd been when she got separated from Jason in the Burning Maze—how she couldn't bear to lose another friend.

I wondered again what was behind their breakup.

People change, Piper had said.

Full points for vagueness, girl, but I wanted the *dirt*.

"So," she said. "Any other surprises? Any more tiny details you forgot?"

Jason shook his head. "I think that's it."

"Okay," Piper said. "Then we go to the wharf. We find this boat. We find Caligula's magic booties, and we kill him if we get the chance. But we *don't* let each other die."

"Or let *me* die," Meg added. "Or even Apollo."

"Thank you, Meg," I said. "My heart is as warm as a partially thawed burrito."

"No problem." She picked her nose, just in case she died and never got another chance. "How do we know which is the right boat?"

"I have a feeling we'll know," I said. "Caligula was never subtle."

"Assuming the boat is there this time," Jason said.

"It'd better be," said Piper. "Otherwise I stole this van and got you out of your afternoon physics lecture for nothing."

"Darn," Jason said.

They shared a guarded smile, a sort of *Yes, things are still weird between us, but I don't intend on letting you die today* look.

I hoped our expedition would go as smoothly as Piper had described. I suspected our odds were better of winning the Mount Olympus Mega-God Lottery. (The most I ever got was five drachmas on a scratcher card once.)

We drove in silence along the seaside highway.

To our left, the Pacific glittered. Surfers plied the waves. Palm trees bent in the breeze. To our left, the hills were dry and brown, littered with the red flowers of heat-distressed azaleas. Try as I might, I could not help thinking of those crimson swathes as the spilled blood of dryads, fallen in battle. I remembered our cactus friends back at the Cistern, bravely and stubbornly clinging to life. I remembered Money Maker, broken and burned in the maze under Los Angeles. For their sake, I *had* to stop Caligula. Otherwise…No. There could be no *otherwise.*

Finally, we reached Santa Barbara, and I saw why Caligula might like the place.

If I squinted, I could imagine I was back in the Roman resort town of Baiae. The curve of the coastline was almost the same—as well as the golden beaches, the hills dotted with upscale stucco and red-tiled homes, the pleasure craft moored in the harbor. The locals even had the same sunbaked, pleasantly dazed expressions, as if they were biding their time between morning surf sessions and afternoon golf.

The biggest difference: Mount Vesuvius did not rise in the distance. But I had a feeling another presence loomed over this lovely little town—just as dangerous and volcanic.

"He'll be here," I said, as we parked the van on Cabrillo Boulevard.

Piper arched her eyebrows. "Are you sensing a disturbance in the Force?"

"Please," I muttered. "I'm sensing my usual bad luck. In a place this harmless-looking, there's no way we will *not* find trouble."

We spent the afternoon canvassing the Santa Barbara waterfront, from the East Beach to the breakwater jetties. We disrupted a flock of pelicans in the saltwater marsh. We woke some napping sea lions on the fishing dock. We jostled through roving hordes of tourists on Stearns Wharf. In the harbor, we found a virtual forest of single-mast boats, along with some luxury yachts, but none seemed large or gaudy enough for a Roman emperor.

Jason even flew over the water for aerial reconnaissance. When he came back, he reported no suspicious vessels on the horizon.

"Were you on your horse, Tempest, just then?" Meg asked. "I couldn't tell."

Jason smiled. "Nah, I don't call Tempest unless it's an emergency. I was just flying around on my own, manipulating the wind."

Meg pouted, considering the pockets of her gardening belt. "I can summon yams."

At last we gave up searching and grabbed a table at a beachside café. The grilled fish tacos were worthy of an ode by the Muse Euterpe herself.

"I don't mind giving up," I admitted, spooning some spicy seviche into my mouth, "if it comes with dinner."

"This is just a break," Meg warned. "Don't get comfortable."

I wished she hadn't phrased that as an order. It made it difficult for me to sit still for the rest of my meal.

We sat at the café, enjoying the breeze, the food, and the iced tea until the sun dipped to the horizon, turning the sky Camp Half-Blood orange. I allowed myself to hope that I'd been mistaken about Caligula's presence. We'd come here in vain. Hooray! I was about to suggest heading back to the van, perhaps finding a hotel so I wouldn't have to crash in a sleeping bag at the bottom of a desert well again, when Jason rose from our picnic-table bench.

"There." He pointed out to sea.

The ship seemed to materialize from the sun's glare, the way my sun chariot used to whenever I pulled into the Stables of Sunset at the end of a long day's ride. The yacht was a gleaming white monstrosity with five decks above the waterline, its tinted black windows like elongated insect eyes. As with all big ships, it was difficult to judge its size from a distance, but the fact that it had *two* onboard helicopters, one aft and one forward, plus a small submarine locked in a crane on the starboard side, told me this was not an average pleasure craft. Perhaps there were bigger yachts in the mortal world, but I guessed not many.

"That *has* to be it," Piper said. "What now? You think it will dock?"

"Hold on," Meg said. "Look."

Another yacht, identical to the first, resolved out of the sunlight about a mile to the south.

"That must be a mirage, right?" Jason asked uneasily. "Or a decoy?"

Meg grunted in dismay, pointing out to sea yet again.

A third yacht shimmered into existence, halfway between the first two.

"This is crazy," Piper said. "Each one of those boats has to cost millions."

"Half a billion," I corrected. "Or more. Caligula was never shy about spending money. He is part of the Triumvirate. They've been accumulating wealth for centuries."

Another yacht popped onto the horizon as if coming out of sunshine warp, then another. Soon there were dozens—a loose armada strung across the mouth of the harbor like a string being fitted on a bow.

"No way." Piper rubbed her eyes. "This *has* to be an illusion."

"It's not." My heart sank. I'd seen this sort of display before.

As we watched, the line of super-yachts maneuvered closer together, anchoring themselves stern to bow, forming a glittering, floating blockade from Sycamore Creek all the way to the marina—a mile long at least.

"The Bridge of Boats," I said. "He's done it again."

"Again?" Meg asked.

"Caligula—back in ancient times." I tried to control the quavering in my voice. "When he was a boy, he received a prophecy. A Roman astrologer told him he had as much chance of becoming emperor as he did of riding a horse

across the Bay of Baiae. In other words, it was impossible. But Caligula *did* become emperor. So he ordered the construction of a fleet of super-yachts"—I gestured feebly at the armada in front of us—"like this. He lined the boats up across the Bay of Baiae, forming a massive bridge. Then he rode across it on his horse. It was the biggest floating construction project ever attempted. Caligula couldn't even swim. That didn't faze him. He was determined to thumb his nose at fate."

Piper steepled her hands over her mouth. "The mortals have to see this, right? He can't just cut off all boat traffic in and out of the harbor."

"Oh, the mortals notice," I said. "Look."

Smaller boats began to gather around the yachts, like flies drawn to a sumptuous feast. I spotted two Coast Guard vessels, several local police boats, and dozens of inflatable dinghies with outboard motors, manned by dark-clad men with guns—the emperor's private security, I guessed.

"They're *helping*," Meg murmured, a hard edge to her voice. "Even Nero never…He paid off the police, had lots of mercenaries, but he never showed off *this* much."

Jason gripped the hilt of his gladius. "Where do we even start? How do we find Caligula in all of that?"

I didn't want to find Caligula at all. I wanted to run. The idea of death, *permanent* death with five whole letters and a *d* at the beginning, suddenly seemed very close. But I could feel my friends' confidence wavering. They needed a plan, not a screaming, panicking Lester.

I pointed toward the center of the floating bridge. "We start in the middle—the weakest point of a chain."

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All in the same boat
Wait. Two of us disappeared.
Half in the same boat

JASON Grace ruined that perfectly good line.

As we tromped toward the surf, he sidled up next to me and murmured, "It's not true, you know. The middle of a chain has the same tensile strength as everywhere else, assuming force is applied equally along the links."

I sighed. "Are you making up for missing your physics lecture? You know what I meant!"

"I actually don't," he said. "Why attack in the middle?"

"Because…I don't know!" I said. "They won't be expecting it?"

Meg stopped at the water's edge. "Looks like they're expecting anything."

She was right. As the sunset faded to purple, the yachts lit up like giant Fabergé eggs. Spotlights swept the sky and sea as if advertising the biggest waterbed-mattress sale in history. Dozens of small patrol boats crisscrossed the harbor, just in case any Santa Barbara locals (Santa Barbarians?) had the nerve to try using their own coast.

I wondered if Caligula always had this much security, or if he was expecting us. By now he certainly knew we'd blown up Macro's Military Madness. He'd also probably heard about our fight with Medea in the maze, assuming the sorceress had survived.

Caligula also had the Sibyl of Erythraea, which meant he had access to the same information Herophile had given Jason. The Sibyl might not *want* to help an evil emperor who kept her in molten shackles, but she couldn't refuse any earnest petitioner posing direct questions. Such was the nature of oracular magic. I imagined the best she could do was give her answers in the form of *really* difficult crossword-puzzle clues.

Jason studied the sweep of the searchlights. "I could fly you guys over,

one at a time. Maybe they won't see us."

"I think we should avoid flying, if possible," I said. "And we should find a way over there before it gets much darker."

Piper pushed her windblown hair from her face. "Why? Darkness gives us better cover."

"Strixes," I said. "They become active about an hour after sundown."

"Strixes?" Piper asked.

I recounted our experience with the birds of doom in the Labyrinth. Meg offered helpful editorial comments like *yuck*, *uh-huh*, and *Apollo's fault*.

Piper shuddered. "In Cherokee stories, owls are bad news. They tend to be evil spirits or spying medicine men. If these strixes are like giant bloodsucking owls…yeah, let's not meet them."

"Agreed," Jason said. "But how do we get to the ships?"

Piper stepped into the waves. "Maybe we ask for a lift."

She raised her arms and waved at the nearest dinghy, about fifty yards out, as it swept its light across the beach.

"Uh, Piper?" Jason asked.

Meg summoned her swords. "It's fine. When they get close, I'll take them out."

I stared at my young master. "Meg, those are *mortals*. First of all, your swords will not work on them. Second, they don't understand whom they're working for. We can't—"

"They're working for the B—the bad man," she said. "Caligula."

I noticed her slip of the tongue. I had a feeling she'd been about to say: *working for the Beast.*

She put away her blades, but her voice remained cold and determined. I had a sudden horrible image of McCaffrey the Avenger assaulting the boat with nothing but her fists and packets of gardening seeds.

Jason looked at me as if to ask *Do you need to tie her down, or should I?*

The dinghy veered toward us. Aboard sat three men in dark fatigues, Kevlar vests, and riot helmets. One in back operated the outboard motor. One in front manned the searchlight. The one in the middle, no doubt the friendliest, had an assault rifle propped on his knee.

Piper waved and smiled at them. "Meg, don't attack. I've got this. All of you, give me some space to work, please. I can charm these guys better if you're not glowering behind me."

This was not a difficult request. The three of us backed away, though Jason and I had to drag Meg.

"Hello!" Piper called as the boat came closer. "Don't shoot! We're friendly!"

The boat ran aground with such speed I thought it might keep driving right onto Cabrillo Boulevard. Mr. Searchlight jumped out first, surprisingly

agile for a guy in body armor. Mr. Assault Rifle followed, providing cover while Mr. Engine cut the outboard motor.

Searchlight sized us up, his hand on his sidearm. “Who are you?”

“I’m Piper!” said Piper. “You don’t need to call this in. And you definitely don’t need to train that rifle on us!”

Searchlight’s face contorted. He started to match Piper’s smile, then seemed to remember that his job required him to glower. Assault Rifle did not lower his gun. Engine reached for his walkie-talkie.

“IDs,” barked Searchlight. “All of you.”

Next to me, Meg tensed, ready to become McCaffrey the Avenger. Jason tried to look inconspicuous, but his dress shirt crackled with static electricity.

“Sure!” Piper agreed. “Although I have a much better idea. I’m just going to reach in my pocket, okay? Don’t get excited.”

She pulled out a wad of cash—maybe a hundred dollars total. For all I knew, it represented the last of the McLean fortune.

“My friends and I were talking,” Piper continued, “about how *hard* you guys work, how difficult it must be patrolling the harbor! We were sitting over there at that café, eating these incredible fish tacos, and we thought, *Hey, those guys deserve a break. We should buy them dinner!*”

Searchlight’s eyes seemed to become unmoored from his brain. “Dinner break…?”

“Absolutely!” Piper said. “You can put down that heavy gun, toss that walkie-talkie away. Heck, you can just leave everything with us. We’ll watch it while you eat. Grilled snapper, homemade corn tortillas, seviche salsa.” She glanced back at us. “Amazing food, right, guys?”

We mumbled our assent.

“Yum,” Meg said. She excelled at one-syllable answers.

Assault Rifle lowered his gun. “I could use some fish tacos.”

“We’ve been working hard,” Engine agreed. “We deserve a dinner break.”

“Exactly!” Piper pressed the money into Searchlight’s hand. “Our treat. Thank you for your service!”

Searchlight stared at the wad of cash. “But we’re really not supposed to __”

“Eat with all that gear on?” Piper suggested. “You’re absolutely right. Just throw it all in the boat—the Kevlar, the guns, your cell phones. That’s right. Get comfortable!”

It took several more minutes of cajoling and lighthearted banter, but finally the three mercenaries had stripped down to just their commando pajamas. They thanked Piper, gave her a hug for good measure, then jogged off to assault the beachside café.

As soon as they were gone, Piper stumbled into Jason’s arms.

“Whoa, you okay?” he asked.

“F-fine.” She pushed away awkwardly. “Just harder charming a whole group. I’ll be okay.”

“That was impressive,” I said. “Aphrodite herself could not have done better.”

Piper didn’t look pleased by my comparison. “We should hurry. The charm won’t last.”

Meg grunted. “Still would’ve been easier to kill—”

“Meg,” I chided.

“—to beat them unconscious,” she amended.

“Right.” Jason cleared his throat. “Everybody in the boat!”

We were thirty yards offshore when we heard the mercenaries shouting, “Hey! Stop!” They ran into the surf, holding half-eaten fish tacos and looking confused.

Fortunately, Piper had taken all their weapons and communications devices.

She gave them a friendly wave and Jason gunned the outboard motor.

Jason, Meg, and I rushed to put on the guards’ Kevlar vests and helmets. This left Piper in civilian clothes, but since she was the only one capable of bluffing her way through a confrontation, she let us have all the fun playing dress-up.

Jason made a perfect mercenary. Meg looked ridiculous—a little girl swimming in her father’s Kevlar. I didn’t look much better. The body armor chafed around my middle. (Curse you, un-combat-worthy love handles!) The riot helmet was as hot as an Easy-Bake oven, and the visor kept falling down, perhaps anxious to hide my acne-riddled face.

We tossed the guns overboard. That may sound foolish, but as I’ve said, firearms are fickle weapons in the hands of demigods. They would work on mortals, but no matter what Meg said, I didn’t want to go around mowing down regular humans.

I had to believe that if these mercenaries truly understood whom they were serving, they too would throw down their arms. Surely humans would not blindly follow such an evil man of their own free will—I mean, except for the few hundred exceptions I could think of from human history….But not Caligula!

As we approached the yachts, Jason slowed, matching our speed to that of the other patrol vessels.

He angled toward the nearest yacht. Up close, it towered above us like a white steel fortress. Purple and gold running lights glowed just below the water’s surface so the vessel seemed to float on an ethereal cloud of Imperial Roman power. Painted along the prow of the ship, in black letters taller than me, was the name IVLIA DRVSILLA XXVI.

“Julia Drusilla the Twenty-Sixth,” Piper said. “Was she an empress?”

“No,” I said, “the emperor’s favorite sister.”

My chest tightened as I remembered that poor girl—so pretty, so agreeable, so incredibly out of her depth. Her brother Caligula had doted on her, idolized her. When he became emperor, he insisted she share his every meal, witness his every depraved spectacle, partake in all his violent revels. She had died at twenty-two—crushed by the suffocating love of a sociopath.

“She was probably the only person Caligula ever cared about,” I said. “But why this boat is numbered twenty-six, I don’t know.”

“Because that one is twenty-five.” Meg pointed to the next ship in line, its stern resting a few feet from our prow. Sure enough, painted across the back was IVLIA DRVSILLA XXV.

“I bet the one behind us is number twenty-seven.”

“Fifty super-yachts,” I mused, “all named for Julia Drusilla. Yes, that sounds like Caligula.”

Jason scanned the side of the hull. There were no ladders, no hatches, no conveniently labeled red buttons: PRESS HERE FOR CALIGULA’S SHOES!

We didn’t have much time. We had made it inside the perimeter of patrol vessels and searchlights, but each yacht surely had security cameras. It wouldn’t be long before someone wondered why our little dinghy was floating beside *XXVI*. Also, the mercenaries we’d left on the beach would be doing their best to attract their comrades’ attention. Then there were the flocks of strixes that I imagined would be waking up any minute, hungry and alert for any sign of disembowel-able intruders.

“I’ll fly you guys up,” Jason decided. “One at a time.”

“Me first,” Piper said. “In case someone needs charming.”

Jason turned and let Piper lock her arms around his neck, as if they’d done this countless times before. The winds kicked up around the dinghy, ruffling my hair, and Jason and Piper floated up the side of the yacht.

Oh, how I envied Jason Grace! Such a simple thing it was to ride the winds. As a god, I could have done it with half my manifestations tied behind my back. Now, stuck in my pathetic body complete with love handles, I could only dream of such freedom.

“Hey.” Meg nudged me. “Focus.”

I gave her an indignant harrumph. “I am *pure* focus. I might, however, ask where *your* head is.”

She scowled. “What do you mean?”

“Your rage,” I said. “The number of times you’ve talked about killing Caligula. Your willingness to…beat his mercenaries unconscious.”

“They’re the enemy.”

Her tone was as sharp as scimitars, giving me fair warning that if I continued with this topic, she might add my name to her Beat Unconscious list.

I decided to take a lesson from Jason—to navigate toward my target at a slower, less direct angle.

"Meg, have I ever told you about the first time I became mortal?"

She peered from under the rim of her ridiculously large helmet. "You messed up or something?"

"I…Yes. I messed up. My father, Zeus, killed one of my favorite sons, Asclepius, for bringing people back from the dead without permission. Long story. The point is…I was furious with Zeus, but he was too powerful and scary for me to fight. He would've vaporized me. So I took my revenge out in another way."

I peered at the top of the hull. I saw no sign of Jason or Piper. Hopefully that meant they had found Caligula's shoes and were just waiting for a clerk to bring them a pair in the right size.

"Anyway," I continued, "I couldn't kill Zeus. So I found the guys who had made his lightning bolts, the Cyclopes. I killed *them* in revenge for Asclepius. As punishment, Zeus made me mortal."

Meg kicked me in the shin.

"Ow!" I yelped. "What was that for?"

"For being dumb," she said. "Killing the Cyclopes was dumb."

I wanted to protest that this had happened thousands of years ago, but I feared it might just earn me another kick.

"Yes," I agreed. "It was dumb. But my point is…I was projecting my anger onto someone else, someone safer. I think you might be doing the same thing now, Meg. You're raging at Caligula because it's safer than raging at your stepfather."

I braced my shins for more pain.

Meg stared down at her Kevlar-coated chest. "That's not what I'm doing."

"I don't blame you," I hastened to add. "Anger is *good*. It means you're making progress. But be aware that you might be angry right now at the wrong person. I don't want you charging blindly into battle against this particular emperor. As hard as it is to believe, he is even more devious and deadly than Ne—the Beast."

She clenched her fists. "I told you, I'm not doing that. You don't know. You don't get it."

"You're right," I said. "What you had to endure in Nero's house…I can't imagine. No one should suffer like that, but—"

"Shut up," she snapped.

So, of course, I did. The words I'd been planning to say avalanched back down my throat.

"You don't know," she said again. "This Caligula guy did *plenty* to my dad and me. I can be mad at him if I want. I'll kill him if I can. I'll…" She faltered, as if struck by a sudden thought. "Where's Jason? He should be back

by now.”

I glanced up. I would have screamed if my voice were working. Two large dark figures dropped toward us in a controlled, silent descent on what appeared to be parasails. Then I realized those were not parasails—they were *giant ears*. In an instant, the creatures were upon us. They landed gracefully on either end of our dinghy, their ears folding around them, their swords at our throats.

The creatures looked very much like the Big Ear guard Piper had hit with her dart at the entrance to the Burning Maze, except these were older and had black fur. Their blades were blunt-tipped with serrated double edges, equally suited for bashing or hacking. With a jolt, I recognized the weapons as khandas, from the Indian subcontinent. I would have been pleased with myself for remembering such an obscure fact, had I not at that moment had a khanda’s serrated edge across my jugular vein.

Then I had another flash of recollection. I remembered one of Dionysus’s many drunken stories about his military campaigns in India—how he had come across a vicious tribe of demi-humans with eight fingers, huge ears, and furry faces. Why couldn’t I have thought of that sooner? What had Dionysus told me about them…? Ah, yes. His exact words were: *Never,* ever *try to fight them.*

“You’re *pandai*,” I managed to croak. “That’s what your race is called.”

The one next to me bared his beautiful white teeth. “Indeed! Now be nice little prisoners and come along. Otherwise your friends are dead.”

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Oh, Florence and Grunk
La-di-da, something, something
I'll get back to you

PERHAPS Jason, the physics expert, could explain to me how pandai flew. I didn't get it. Somehow, even while carrying us, our captors managed to launch themselves skyward with nothing but the flapping of their tremendous lobes. I wished Hermes could see them. He would never again brag about being able to wiggle his ears.

The pandai dropped us unceremoniously on the starboard deck, where two more of their kind held Jason and Piper at arrow-point. One of those guards appeared smaller and younger than the others, with white fur instead of black. Judging from the sour look on his face, I guessed he was the same guy Piper had shot down with Grandpa Tom's special recipe in downtown Los Angeles.

Our friends were on their knees, their hands zip-tied behind their backs, their weapons confiscated. Jason had a black eye. The side of Piper's head was matted with blood.

I rushed to her aid (being the good person I was) and poked at her cranium, trying to determine the extent of her injury.

"Ow," she muttered, pulling away. "I'm fine."

"You could have a concussion," I said.

Jason sighed miserably. "That's supposed to be *my* job. I'm always the one who gets knocked in the head. Sorry, guys. Things didn't exactly go as planned."

The largest guard, who had carried me aboard, cackled with glee. "The girl tried to charmspeak us! *Pandai*, who hear every nuance of speech! The boy tried to fight us! *Pandai*, who train from birth to master every weapon! Now you will all die!"

"Die! Die!" barked the other pandai, though I noticed the white-furred

youngster did not join in. He moved stiffly, as if his poison-darted leg still bothered him.

Meg glanced from enemy to enemy, probably gauging how fast she could take them all down. The arrows pointed at Jason and Piper's chests made for tricky calculations.

"Meg, don't," Jason warned. "These guys—they're ridiculously good. And fast."

"Fast! Fast!" the pandai barked in agreement.

I scanned the deck. No additional guards were running toward us, no searchlights were trained on our position. No horns blared. Somewhere inside the boat, gentle music played—not the sort of sound track one might expect during an incursion.

The pandai had not raised a general alarm. Despite their threats, they had not yet killed us. They'd even gone to the trouble of zip-tying Piper's and Jason's hands. Why?

I turned to the largest guard. "Good sir, are you the panda in charge?"

He hissed. "The singular form is *pandos*. I *hate* being called a *panda*. Do I *look* like a panda?"

I decided not to answer that. "Well, Mr. Pandos—"

"My name is Amax," he snapped.

"Of course. Amax." I studied his majestic ears, then hazarded an educated guess. "I imagine you hate people eavesdropping on you."

Amax's furry black nose twitched. "Why do you say this? What did you overhear?"

"Nothing!" I assured him. "But I bet you have to be careful. Always other people, other pandai snooping into your business. That's—that's why you haven't raised an alarm yet. You *know* we're important prisoners. You want to keep control of the situation, without anyone else taking the credit for your good work."

The other pandai grumbled.

"Vector, on boat twenty-five, is *always* spying," the dark-furred archer muttered.

"Taking credit for our ideas," said the second archer. "Like Kevlar ear armor."

"Exactly!" I said, trying to ignore Piper, who was incredulously mouthing the words *Kevlar ear armor?* "Which is why, uh, before you do anything rash, you're going to want to hear what I have to say. In private."

Amax snorted. "Ha!"

His comrades echoed him: "HA-HA!"

"You just lied," Amax said. "I could hear it in your voice. You're afraid. You're bluffing. You have nothing to say."

"*I* do," Meg countered. "I'm Nero's stepdaughter."

Blood rushed into Amax's ears so rapidly I was surprised he didn't faint.

The shocked archers lowered their weapons.

"Timbre! Crest!" Amax snapped. "Keep those arrows steady!" He glowered at Meg. "You seem to be telling the truth. What is Nero's stepdaughter doing here?"

"Looking for Caligula," Meg said. "So I can kill him."

The pandai's ears rippled in alarm. Jason and Piper looked at each other as if thinking *Welp. Now we die.*

Amax narrowed his eyes. "You say you are from Nero. Yet you want to kill our master. This does not make sense."

"It's a juicy story," I promised. "With lots of secrets, twists, and turns. But if you kill us, you'll never hear it. If you take us to the emperor, someone *else* will torture it out of us. We would gladly tell you everything. You captured us, after all. But isn't there somewhere more private we can talk, so no one will overhear?"

Amax glanced toward the ship's bow, as if Vector might already be listening in. "You seem to be telling the truth, but there's so much weakness and fear in your voice, it's hard to be sure."

"Uncle Amax." The white-haired pandos spoke for the first time. "Perhaps the pimply boy has a point. If it's valuable information—"

"Silence, Crest!" snapped Amax. "You've already disgraced yourself once this week."

The pandos leader pulled more zip ties from his belt. "Timbre, Peak, bind the pimply boy and the stepdaughter of Nero. We will take them all below, interrogate them ourselves, and *then* hand them over to the emperor!"

"Yes! Yes!" barked Timbre and Peak.

So it was that three powerful demigods and one former major Olympian god were led as prisoners into a super-yacht by four fuzzy creatures with ears the size of satellite dishes. Not my finest hour.

Since I had reached peak humiliation, I assumed Zeus would pick that moment to recall me to the heavens and the other gods would spend the next hundred years laughing at me.

But no. I remained fully and pathetically Lester.

The guards hustled us to the aft deck, which featured six hot tubs, a multicolored fountain, and a flashing gold and purple dance floor just waiting for partyers to arrive.

Affixed to the stern, a red-carpeted ramp jutted across the water, connecting our boat to the prow of the next yacht. I guessed all the boats were linked this way, making a road across Santa Barbara Harbor, just in case Caligula decided to do a golf-cart drive-through.

Rising amidships, the upper decks gleamed with dark-tinted windows and

white walls. Far above, the conning tower sprouted radar dishes, satellite antennae, and two billowing pennants: one with the imperial eagle of Rome, the other with a golden triangle on a field of purple, which I supposed was the logo for Triumvirate Holdings.

Two more guards flanked the heavy oak doors that led inside. The guy on the left looked like a mortal mercenary, with the same black pajamas and body armor as the gentlemen we'd sent on the wild fish-taco chase. The guy on the right was a Cyclops (the huge single eye gave him away). He also smelled like a Cyclops (wet wool socks) and dressed like a Cyclops (denim cutoffs, torn black T-shirt, and a large wooden club).

The human mercenary frowned at our merry band of captors and prisoners.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Not your concern, Florence," Amax growled. "Let us through!"

Florence? I might have snickered, except Florence weighed three hundred pounds, had knife scars across his face, and *still* had a better name than Lester Papadopoulos.

"Regulations," Florence said. "You got prisoners, I have to call it in."

"Not yet, you won't." Amax spread his ears like the hood of a cobra. "This is *my* ship. *I'll* tell you when to call it in—*after* we interrogate these intruders."

Florence frowned at his Cyclops partner. "What do you think, Grunk?"

Now, Grunk—that was a good Cyclops name. I didn't know if Florence realized he was working with a Cyclops. The Mist could be unpredictable. But I immediately formulated the premise for an action-adventure buddy-comedy series, *Florence and Grunk.* If I survived captivity, I'd have to mention it to Piper's father. Perhaps he could help me schedule some lunches and pitch the idea. Oh, gods…I had been in Southern California too long.

Grunk shrugged. "It's Amax's ears on the line if the boss gets mad."

"Okay." Florence waved us through. "You all have fun."

I had little time to appreciate the opulent interior—the solid-gold fixtures, the luxurious Persian carpets, the million-dollar works of art, the plush purple furniture I was pretty sure had come from Prince's estate sale.

We saw no other guards or crew, which seemed strange. Then again, I supposed that, even with *Caligula's* resources, finding enough personnel to man fifty super-yachts at once might be difficult.

As we walked through a walnut-paneled library hung with masterpiece paintings, Piper caught her breath. She pointed her chin toward a Joan Miró abstraction.

"That came from my dad's house," she said.

"When we get out of here," Jason muttered, "we'll take it with us."

“I *heard* that.” Peak jabbed his sword hilt into Jason’s ribs.

Jason stumbled against Piper, who stumbled into a Picasso. Seeing an opportunity, Meg surged forward, apparently meaning to tackle Amax with all one hundred pounds of her weight. Before she took two steps, an arrow sprouted from the carpet at her feet.

“Don’t,” said Timbre. His vibrating bowstring was the only evidence he’d made the shot. He had drawn and fired so fast even *I* couldn’t believe it.

Meg backed away. “Fine. Jeez.”

The pandai herded us into a forward lounge. Along the front wrapped a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree glass wall overlooking the prow. Off to starboard, the lights of Santa Barbara twinkled. In front of us, yachts twenty-five through one made a glittering necklace of amethyst, gold, and platinum across the dark water.

The sheer extravagance of it all hurt my brain, and normally I was all about extravagance.

The pandai arranged four plush chairs in a row and shoved us into them. As interrogation rooms went, it wasn’t bad. Peak paced behind us, sword at the ready in case anyone required decapitation. Timbre and Crest lurked on either flank, their bows down, but arrows nocked. Amax pulled up a chair and sat facing us, spreading his ears around him like a king’s robe.

“This place is private,” he announced. “Talk.”

“First,” I said, “I must know why you’re not followers of Apollo. Such great archers? The finest hearing in the world? Eight fingers on each hand? You would be natural musicians! We seem *made* for each other!”

Amax studied me. “You are the former god, eh? They told us about you.”

“I am Apollo,” I confirmed. “It’s not too late to pledge me your loyalty.”

Amax’s mouth quivered. I hoped he was on the verge of crying, perhaps throwing himself at my feet and begging my forgiveness.

Instead, he howled with laughter. “What do we need with Olympian gods? Especially gods who are pimply boys with no power?”

“But there’s so much I could teach you!” I insisted. “Music! Poetry! I could teach you how to write haikus!”

Jason looked at me and shook his head vigorously, though I had no idea why.

“Music and poetry hurt our ears,” Amax complained. “We have no need of them!”

“I like music,” Crest murmured, flexing his fingers. “I can play a little—”

“Silence!” Amax yelled. “You can play *silence* for once, worthless nephew!”

Aha, I thought. Even among the pandai there were frustrated musicians. Amax suddenly reminded me of my father, Zeus, when he came storming down the hallway on Mount Olympus (literally storming, with thunder,

lightning, and torrential rain) and ordered me to stop playing my infernal zither music. A totally unfair demand. Everyone *knows* 2:00 a.m. is the optimal time to practice the zither.

I might have been able to sway Crest to our side…if only I'd had more time. And if he weren't in the company of three older and larger pandai. And if we hadn't started our acquaintance with Piper shooting him in the leg with a poisoned dart.

Amax reclined in his cushy purple throne. "We pandai are mercenaries. We *choose* our masters. Why would we pick a washed-up god like you? Once, we served the kings of India! Now we serve Caligula!"

"Caligula! Caligula!" Timbre and Peak cried. Again, Crest was conspicuously quiet, frowning at his bow.

"The emperor trusts only us!" Timbre bragged.

"Yes," Peak agreed. "Unlike those Germani, *we* never stabbed him to death!"

I wanted to point out that this was a fairly low bar for loyalty, but Meg interrupted.

"The night is young," she said. "We could all stab him together."

Amax sneered. "I am still waiting, daughter of Nero, to hear your juicy story about why you wish to kill our master. You'd better have good information. And lots of twists and turns! Convince me you are worth bringing to Caesar alive, rather than as dead bodies, and perhaps I'll get a promotion tonight! I will *not* be passed over again for some idiot like Overdrive on boat three, or Wah-Wah on boat forty-three."

"Wah-Wah?" Piper made a sound between a hiccup and a giggle, which may have been the effect of her bashed head. "Are you guys *all* named after guitar pedals? My dad has a collection of those. Well…he *had* a collection."

Amax scowled. "Guitar pedals? I don't know what that means! If you are making fun of our culture—"

"Hey," Meg said. "You wanna hear my story or not?"

We all turned to her.

"Um, Meg…?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

The pandai no doubt picked up on my nervous tone, but I couldn't help it. First of all, I had no idea what Meg could possibly say that would increase our chances of survival. Second, knowing Meg, she would say it in ten words or less. Then we'd all be dead.

"I got twists and turns." She narrowed her eyes. "But are you *sure* we're alone, Mr. Amax? No one else is listening?"

"Of course not!" said Amax. "This ship is *my* base. That glass is fully soundproofed." He gestured dismissively at the ship in front of us. "Vector won't hear a word!"

“What about Wah-Wah?” Meg asked. “I know he’s on boat forty-three with the emperor, but if his spies are nearby—”

“Ridiculous!” Amax said. “The emperor isn’t on boat forty-three!”

Timbre and Peak snickered.

“Boat forty-three is the emperor’s *footwear* boat, silly girl,” said Peak. “An important assignment, yes, but not the throne-room boat.”

“Right,” Timbre said. “That’s Reverb’s boat, number twelve—”

“Silence!” Amax snapped. “Enough delays, girl. Tell me what you know, or die.”

“Okay,” Meg leaned forward as if to impart a secret. “Twists and turns.”

Her hands shot forward, suddenly and inexplicably free of the zip tie. Her rings flashed as she threw them, turning into scimitars as they hurtled toward Amax and Peak.

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I can kill you all
Or I can sing you Joe Walsh
Really, it's your choice

THE children of Demeter are all about flowers. Amber waves of grain. Feeding the world and nurturing life.

They also excel at planting scimitars in the chests of their enemies.

Meg's Imperial gold blades found their targets. One hit Amax with such force he exploded in a cloud of yellow dust. The other cut through Peak's bow, embedding itself in his sternum and causing him to disintegrate inward like sand through an hourglass.

Crest fired his bow. Fortunately for me, his aim was off. The arrow buzzed past my face, the fletching scraping my chin, and impaled itself in my chair.

Piper kicked back in her seat, knocking into Timbre so his sword swing went wild. Before he could recover and decapitate her, Jason got overexcited.

I say that because of the lightning. The sky outside flashed, the curved wall of glass shattered, and tendrils of electricity wrapped around Timbre, frying him into an ash pile.

Effective, yes, but not the sort of stealth we'd been hoping for.

"Oops," said Jason.

With a horrified whimper, Crest dropped his bow. He staggered backward, struggling to draw his sword. Meg yanked her first scimitar from Amax's dust-covered chair and marched toward him.

"Meg, wait!" I said.

She glared at me. "What?"

I tried to raise my hands in a placating gesture, then remembered they were tied behind my back.

"Crest," I said, "there's no shame in surrender. You are not a fighter."

He gulped. “Y-you don’t know me.”

“You’re holding your sword backward,” I pointed out. “So unless you intend to stab yourself…”

He fumbled to correct the situation.

“Fly!” I pleaded. “This doesn’t have to be your fight. Get out of here! Become the musician you want to see in the world!”

He must have heard the earnestness in my voice. He dropped his sword and jumped through the gaping hole in the glass, ear-sailing into the darkness.

“Why’d you let him go?” Meg demanded. “He’ll warn everybody.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Also, it doesn’t matter. We just announced ourselves with a literal thunderbolt.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Jason said. “Sometimes that just happens.”

Lightning strikes seemed like the sort of power he really needed to get under control, but we had no time to argue about it. As Meg cut our zip ties, Florence and Grunk charged into the room.

Piper yelled, “Stop!”

Florence tripped and face-planted on the carpet, his rifle spraying a full clip sideways, shooting off the legs of a nearby sofa.

Grunk raised his club and charged. I instinctively pulled my bow, nocked an arrow, and let it fly—straight into the Cyclops’s eye.

I was stunned. I’d actually hit my target!

Grunk fell to his knees, keeled over sideways, and began to disintegrate, putting an end to my plans for a cross-species buddy comedy.

Piper walked up to Florence, who was groaning with a broken nose.

“Thanks for stopping,” she said, then gagged him and trussed his wrists and ankles with his own zip ties.

“Well, that was interesting.” Jason turned to Meg. “And what you did? Incredible. Those pandai—when I tried to fight them, they disarmed me like it was child’s play, but *you*, with those swords…”

Meg’s cheeks reddened. “It was no big deal.”

“It was a *very* big deal.” Jason faced me. “So what now?”

A muted voice buzzed in my head. *NOW, THE VILE ROGUE APOLLO SHALT REMOVE ME FROM THIS MONSTER’S EYE POSTHASTE!*

“Oh, dear.” I had done what I’d always feared, and sometimes dreamed of. I had mistakenly used the Arrow of Dodona in combat. Its sacred point now quivered in the eye socket of Grunk, who had been reduced to nothing but his skull—a spoil of war, I supposed.

“Very sorry,” I said, pulling the arrow free.

Meg snorted. “Is that—?”

“The Arrow of Dodona,” I said.

AND MINE FURY IS BOUNDLESS! the arrow intoned. *THOU*

SHOOTEST ME FORTH TO SLAY THY FOES AS IF I WAST A MERE ARROW!

"Yes, yes, I apologize. Now hush, please." I turned to my comrades. "We need to move quickly. The security forces will be coming."

"Emperor Stupid is on boat twelve," Meg said. "That's where we go."

"But the shoe boat," I said, "is forty-three, which is in the opposite direction."

"What if Emperor Stupid is *wearing* his shoes?" she asked.

"Hey." Jason pointed at the Arrow of Dodona. "That's the mobile source of prophecy you were telling us about, right? Maybe you should ask it."

I found that an annoyingly reasonable suggestion. I raised the arrow. "You heard them, O Wise Arrow. Which way do we go?"

THOU TELLEST ME TO HUSH, THEN THOU ASKETH ME FOR WISDOM? OH, FIE! OH, VILLAINY! BOTH DIRECTIONS MUST THOU PURSUE, IF THOU WOULDST SEE SUCCESS. BUT BEWARE. I SEE GREAT PAIN, GREAT SUFFERING. SACRIFICE MOST BLOODY!

"What did he say?" Piper demanded.

Oh, reader, I was so tempted to lie! I wanted to tell my friends that the arrow was in favor of returning to Los Angeles and booking rooms at a five-star hotel.

I caught Jason's eyes. I remembered how I had exhorted him to tell Piper the truth about the Sibyl's prophecy. I decided I could do no less.

I related what the arrow had said.

"So we split up?" Piper shook her head. "I hate this plan."

"Me too," Jason said. "Which means it's probably the right move."

He knelt and retrieved his gladius from the dust-pile remains of Timbre. Then he tossed the dagger Katoptris to Piper.

"I'm going after Caligula," he said. "Even if the shoes aren't there, maybe I can buy you guys some time, distract the security forces."

Meg picked up her other scimitar. "I'll come with you."

Before I could argue, she took a flying leap out of the broken window—which was a pretty good metaphor for her general approach to life.

Jason gave Piper and me one last worried look. "You two be careful."

He jumped after Meg. Almost immediately, gunfire erupted on the foredeck below.

I grimaced at Piper. "Those two were our *fighters.* We shouldn't have let them go together."

"Don't underestimate my fighting skill," Piper said. "Now let's go shoe-shopping."

She waited only long enough for me to clean and bandage her wounded head in the nearest restroom. Then she donned Florence's combat helmet and off we went.

I soon realized Piper didn't need to rely on charmspeak to persuade people. She carried herself with confidence, striding from ship to ship like she was supposed to be there. The yachts were lightly guarded—perhaps because most of the pandai and strixes had already flown over to check out the lightning strike on ship twenty-six. The few mortal mercenaries we passed gave Piper no more than a brief glance. Since I followed in her wake, they ignored me too. I supposed if they were used to working side by side with Cyclopes and Big Ears, they could overlook a couple of teenagers in riot gear.

Boat twenty-eight was a floating water park, with multilevel swimming pools connected by waterfalls, slides, and transparent tubes. A lonely lifeguard offered us a towel as we walked by. He looked sad when we didn't take one.

Boat twenty-nine: a full-service spa. Steam poured from every open porthole. On the aft deck, an army of bored-looking masseuses and cosmeticians stood ready, just in case Caligula decided to drop by with fifty friends for a shiatsu and mani-pedi party. I was tempted to stop, just for a quick shoulder massage, but since Piper, daughter of Aphrodite, marched right past without a glance at the offerings, I decided not to embarrass myself.

Boat thirty was a literal moveable feast. The entire ship seemed designed to provide an all-you-can-eat twenty-four-hour buffet, which no one was partaking in. Chefs stood by. Waiters waited. New dishes were brought out and old ones removed. I suspected the uneaten food, enough to feed the greater Los Angeles area, would be dumped overboard. Typical Caligula extravagance. Your ham sandwich tastes *so* much better when you know hundreds of identical sandwiches have been thrown away as your chefs waited for you to get hungry.

Our good luck failed on boat thirty-one. As soon as we crossed the red-carpeted ramp onto the bow, I knew we were in trouble. Groups of off-duty mercenaries lounged here and there, talking, eating, checking their cell phones. We got more frowns, more questioning looks.

From the tension in Piper's posture, I could tell she sensed the problem too. But before I could say *Gosh, Piper, I think we've stumbled into Caligula's floating barracks and we're about to die,* she forged ahead, doubtless deciding it would be as dangerous to backtrack as to bluff our way through.

She was wrong.

On the aft deck, we found ourselves in the middle of a Cyclops/mortal volleyball game. In a sand-filled pit, half a dozen hairy Cyclopes in swim trunks battled it out with half a dozen equally hairy mortals in combat pants. Around the edges of the game, more off-duty mercenaries were barbecuing

steaks on a grill, laughing, sharpening knives, and comparing tattoos.

At the grill, a double-wide dude with a flattop haircut and a chest tattoo that read MOTHER spotted us and froze. “Hey!”

The volleyball game stopped. Everyone on deck turned and glowered at us.

Piper pulled off her helmet. “Apollo, back me up!”

I feared she might pull a Meg and charge into battle. In that case, *backing her up* would mean getting ripped limb from limb by sweaty ex-military types, which was *not* on my bucket list.

Instead, Piper began to sing.

I wasn’t sure what surprised me more: Piper’s beautiful voice, or the tune she chose.

I recognized it immediately: “Life of Illusion” by Joe Walsh. The 1980s were something of a blur to me, but that song I remembered—1981, the very beginning of MTV. Oh, the lovely videos I’d produced for Blondie and the Go-Gos! The amount of hairspray and leopard-print Spandex we had used!

The crowd of mercenaries listened in confused silence. Should they kill us now? Should they wait for us to finish? It wasn’t every day someone serenaded you with Joe Walsh in the middle of a volleyball game. I’m sure the mercenaries were a little fuzzy on the proper etiquette.

After a couple of lines, Piper gave me a sharp glance like *A little help?*

Ah, she wanted me to back her up with *music*!

With great relief, I whipped out my ukulele and played along. In truth, Piper’s voice needed no help. She belted out the lyrics with passion and clarity—a shock wave of emotion that was more than a heartfelt performance, more than charmspeak.

She moved through the crowd, singing of her own illusionary life. She inhabited the song. She invested the words with pain and sorrow, turning Walsh’s peppy tune into a melancholy confessional. She spoke of breaking through walls of confusion, of enduring the little surprises nature had thrown at her, of jumping to conclusions about who she was.

She didn’t change the lyrics. Nevertheless, I felt her story in every line: her struggle as the neglected child of a famous movie star; her mixed feelings about discovering she was a daughter of Aphrodite; most hurtful of all, her realization that the supposed love of her life, Jason Grace, was not someone she wanted to be with romantically. I didn’t understand it all, but the power of her voice was undeniable. My ukulele responded. My chords turned more resonant, my riffs more soulful. Every note I played was a cry of sympathy for Piper McLean, my own musical skill amplifying hers.

The guards became unfocused. Some sat down, cradling their heads in their hands. Some stared into space and let their steaks burn on the grill.

None of them stopped us as we crossed the aft deck. None followed us

across the bridge to boat thirty-two. We were halfway across that yacht before Piper finished her song and leaned heavily against the nearest wall. Her eyes were red, her face hollowed out with emotion.

"Piper?" I stared at her in amazement. "How did you—?"

"Shoes now," she croaked. "Talk later."

She stumbled on.

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Apollo, disguised
As Apollo, disguised as . . .
Nah. Too depressing.

WE saw no sign that the mercenaries were pursuing us. How could they? Even hardened warriors could not be expected to give chase after such a performance. I imagined they were sobbing in each other's arms, or rifling through the yacht for extra boxes of tissues.

We made our way through the thirties of Caligula's super-yacht chain, using stealth when necessary, mostly relying on the apathy of the crew members we encountered. Caligula had always inspired fear in his servants, but that didn't equate to loyalty. No one asked us any questions.

On boat forty, Piper collapsed. I rushed to help, but she pushed me away.

"I'm okay," she muttered.

"You are not okay," I said. "You probably have a concussion. You just worked a powerful bit of musical charm. You need a minute to rest."

"We don't *have* a minute."

I was fully aware of that. Sporadic bursts of gunfire still crackled over the harbor from the direction we had come. The harsh *scree* of strixes pierced the night sky. Our friends were buying us time, and we had none to waste.

This was also the night of the new moon. Whatever plans Caligula had for Camp Jupiter, far to the north, they were happening now. I could only hope Leo had reached the Roman demigods, and that they could fend off whatever evil came their way. Being powerless to help them was a terrible feeling. It made me anxious not to waste a moment.

"Nevertheless," I told Piper, "I *really* don't have time for you to die on me, or go into a coma. So you *will* take a moment to sit. Let's get out of the open."

Piper was too weak to protest much. In her present condition, I doubted

she could have charmspoken her way out of a parking ticket. I carried her inside yacht forty, which turned out to be dedicated to Caligula's wardrobe.

We passed room after room filled with clothes—suits, togas, armor, dresses (why not?), and a variety of costumes from pirate to Apollo to panda bear. (Again, why not?)

I was tempted to dress up as Apollo, just to feel sorry for myself, but I didn't want to take the time to apply the gold paint. Why did mortals always think I was gold? I mean, I *could* be gold, but the shininess detracted from my naturally amazing looks. Correction: my *former* naturally amazing looks.

Finally we found a dressing room with a couch. I moved a pile of evening dresses, then ordered Piper to sit. I pulled out a crushed square of ambrosia and ordered her to eat it. (My goodness, I could be bossy when I had to be. At least that was one godly power I hadn't lost.)

While Piper nibbled her divine energy bar, I stared glumly at the racks of bespoke finery. "Why can't the shoes be here? This is his wardrobe boat, after all."

"Come on, Apollo." Piper winced as she shifted on the cushions. "Everybody knows you need a separate super-yacht just for shoes."

"I can't tell if you're joking."

She picked up a Stella McCartney dress—a lovely low-cut number in scarlet silk. "Nice." Then she pulled out her knife, gritting her teeth from the effort, and slit the gown right down the front.

"That felt good," she decided.

It seemed pointless to me. You couldn't hurt Caligula by ruining his things. He had *all* the things. Nor did it seem to make Piper any happier. Thanks to the ambrosia, her color was better. Her eyes were not as dulled with pain. But her expression remained stormy, like her mother's whenever she heard someone praise Scarlett Johansson's good looks. (Tip: *Never* mention Scarlett Johansson around Aphrodite.)

"The song you sang to the mercenaries," I ventured, "'Life of Illusion.'"

The corners of Piper's eyes tightened, as if she'd known this conversation was coming but was too tired to deflect it. "It's an early memory. Right after my dad got his first big acting break, he was blasting that song in the car. We were driving to our new house, the place in Malibu. He was singing to me. We were both so happy. I must have been…I don't know, in kindergarten?"

"But the way you sang it. You seemed to be talking about yourself, why you broke up with Jason?"

She studied her knife. The blade remained blank, devoid of visions.

"I tried," she murmured. "After the war with Gaea, I convinced myself everything would be perfect. For a while, a few months maybe, I thought it was. Jason's great. He's my closest friend, even more than Annabeth. But"—she spread her hands—"whatever I thought was there, my happily-ever-

after…it just wasn't."

I nodded. "Your relationship was born in crisis. Such romances are difficult to sustain once the crisis is over."

"It wasn't just that."

"A century ago, I dated Grand Duchess Tatiana Romanov," I recalled. "Things were great between us during the Russian Revolution. She was so stressed, so scared, she really needed me. Then the crisis passed, and the magic just wasn't there anymore. Wait, actually, that could've been because she was shot to death along with the rest of her family, but still—"

"It was me."

My thoughts had been drifting through the Winter Palace, through the acrid gun smoke and bitter cold of 1917. Now I snapped back to the present. "What do you mean it was you? You mean you realized you didn't love Jason? That's no one's fault."

She grimaced, as if I still hadn't grasped what she meant…or perhaps she wasn't sure herself.

"I know it's nobody's fault," she said. "I *do* love him. But…like I told you, Hera forced us together—the marriage goddess, arranging a happy couple. My memories of starting to date Jason, our first few months together, were a total illusion. Then, as soon as I found *that* out, before I could even process what it meant, Aphrodite claimed me. My mom, the goddess of love."

She shook her head in dismay. "Aphrodite pushed me into thinking I was…that I needed to…" She sighed. "Look at me, the great charmspeaker. I don't even have words. Aphrodite expects her daughters to wrap men around our little fingers, break their hearts, et cetera."

I remembered the many times Aphrodite and I had fallen out. I was a sucker for romance. Aphrodite always had fun sending tragic lovers my way. "Yes. Your mother has definite ideas about how romance should be."

"So if you take *that* away," Piper said, "the goddess of marriage pushing me to settle down with a nice boy, the goddess of love pushing me to be the perfect romantic lady or whatever—"

"You're wondering who you are without all that pressure."

She stared at the remains of the scarlet evening dress. "For the Cherokee, like traditionally speaking? Your heritage comes from your mom's side. The clan she comes from is the clan you come from. The dad's side doesn't really count." She let out a brittle laugh. "Which means, technically, I'm not Cherokee. I don't belong to any of the seven main clans, because my mom is a Greek goddess."

"Ah."

"So, I mean, do I even have *that* to define myself? The last few months I've been trying to learn more about my heritage. Picking up my granddad's blowgun, talking to my dad about family history to take his mind off stuff.

But what if I'm not *any* of the things I've been told I am? I have to figure out who I am."

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

She brushed her hair behind her ear. "I'm in process."

I could appreciate that. I, too, was in process. It was painful.

A line from the Joe Walsh song reverberated in my head. "'Nature loves her little surprises,'" I said.

Piper snorted. "She sure does."

I stared at the rows of Caligula's outfits—everything from wedding gowns to Armani suits to gladiator armor.

"It's been my observation," I said, "that you humans are more than the sum of your history. You can choose how much of your ancestry to embrace. You can overcome the expectations of your family and your society. What you cannot do, and should never do, is try to be someone other than yourself —Piper McLean."

She gave me a wry smile. "That's nice. I like that. You're sure you're not the god of wisdom?"

"I applied for the job," I said, "but they gave it to someone else. Something about inventing olives." I rolled my eyes.

Piper burst out laughing, which made me feel as if a good strong wind had finally blown all the wildfire smoke out of California. I grinned in response. When was the last time I'd had such a positive exchange with an equal, a friend, a kindred soul? I could not recall.

"All right, O Wise One." Piper struggled to her feet. "We'd better go. We've got a lot more boats to trespass on."

Boat forty-one: Lingerie department. I will spare you the frilly details.

Boat forty-two: a regular super-yacht, with a few crew members who ignored us, two mercenaries whom Piper charmed into jumping overboard, and a two-headed man whom I shot in the groin (by pure luck) and made disintegrate.

"Why would you put a regular boat between your clothes boats and your shoe boat?" Piper wondered. "That's just bad organization."

She sounded remarkably calm. My own nerves were starting to fray. I felt like I was splitting into pieces, the way I used to when several dozen Greek cities all prayed for me to manifest my glorious self at the same time in different places. It's *so* annoying when cities don't coordinate their holy days.

We crossed the port side, and I caught a glimpse of movement in the sky above us—a pale gliding shape much too big to be a seagull. When I looked again, it was gone.

"I think we're being followed," I said. "Our friend Crest."

Piper scanned the night sky. “What do we do about it?”

“I’d recommend nothing,” I said. “If he wanted to attack us or raise the alarm, he could’ve already done it.”

Piper did not look happy about our big-eared stalker, but we kept moving.

At last we reached *Julia Drusilla XLIII*, the fabled ship of shoes.

This time, thanks to the tip-off from Amax and his men, we expected pandai guards, led by the fearsome Wah-Wah. We were better prepared to deal with them.

As soon as we stepped onto the foredeck, I readied my ukulele. Piper said very quietly, “Wow, I hope nobody overhears our secrets!”

Instantly, four pandai came running—two from the port side and two from starboard, all stumbling over each other to get to us first.

As soon as I could see the whites of their tragi, I strummed a C minor 6 tritone chord at top volume, which to creatures with such exquisite hearing must have felt like getting Q-tipped with live electric wires.

The pandai screeched and fell to their knees, giving Piper time to disarm them and zip-tie them thoroughly. Once they were properly hog-tied, I stopped my torturous ukulele assault.

“Which of you is Wah-Wah?” I demanded.

The pandos on the far left snarled, “Who wants to know?”

“Hello, Wah-Wah,” I said. “We’re looking for the emperor’s magical shoes—you know, the ones that let him navigate the Burning Maze. You could save us a lot of time by telling us where they are on board.”

He thrashed and cursed. “Never!”

“Or,” I said, “I’ll let my friend Piper do the searching, while I stay here and serenade you with my out-of-tune ukulele. Are you familiar with ‘Tiptoe through the Tulips’ by Tiny Tim?”

Wah-Wah spasmed with terror. “Deck two, port side, third door!” he spluttered. “Please, no Tiny Tim! No Tiny Tim!”

“Enjoy your evening,” I said.

We left them in peace and went to find some footwear.

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29

A horse is a horse
Of course, of course, and no one
Can— RUN! HE'LL KILL YOU!

A floating mansion full of shoes. Hermes would have been in paradise.

Not that he was the *official* god of shoes, mind you, but as patron deity of travelers, he was the closest thing we Olympians had. Hermes's collection of Air Jordans was unrivaled. He had closets full of winged sandals, rows of patent leather, racks of blue suede, and don't get me started on his roller skates. I still have nightmares about him skating through Olympus with his big hair and gym shorts and high striped socks, listening to Donna Summer on his Walkman.

As Piper and I made our way to deck two, port side, we passed illuminated podiums displaying designer pumps, a hallway lined floor-to-ceiling with shelves of red leather boots, and one room with nothing but soccer cleats, for reasons I couldn't fathom.

The room Wah-Wah had directed us to seemed to be more about quality than quantity.

It was the size of a goodly apartment, with windows that overlooked the sea so the emperor's prize shoes could have a nice view. In the middle of the room, a comfortable pair of couches faced a coffee table with a collection of exotic bottled waters, just in case you got thirsty and needed to rehydrate between putting on the left shoe and the right.

As for the shoes themselves, along the fore and aft walls were rows of…

"Whoa," Piper said.

I thought that summed it up rather well: rows of *whoa*.

On one pedestal sat a pair of Hephaestus's battle boots—huge contraptions with spiked heels and toes, built-in chain-mail socks, and laces that were tiny bronze automaton serpents to prevent unauthorized wearers.

On another pedestal, in a clear acrylic box, a pair of winged sandals

fluttered around, trying to escape.

"Could those be the ones we need?" Piper asked. "We could fly right through the maze."

The idea was appealing, but I shook my head. "Winged shoes are tricky. If we put them on and they're enchanted to take us to the wrong place—"

"Oh, right," Piper said. "Percy told me about a pair that almost…uh, never mind."

We examined the other pedestals. Some held shoes that were merely one-of-a-kind: platform boots studded with diamonds, dress shoes made from the skin of the now extinct Dodo (rude!), or a pair of Adidas signed by all the players of the 1987 LA Lakers.

Other shoes were magical, and labeled as such: a pair of slippers woven by Hypnos to give pleasant dreams and deep sleep; a pair of dancing shoes fashioned by my old friend Terpsichore, the Muse of dance. I'd only seen a few of those over the years. Astaire and Rogers both had a pair. So did Baryshnikov. Then there was a pair of Poseidon's old loafers, which would ensure perfect beach weather, good fishing, gnarly waves, and excellent tanning. Those loafers sounded pretty good to me.

"There." Piper pointed to an old pair of leather sandals casually tossed in the corner of the room. "Can we assume the least likely shoes are actually the most likely?"

I didn't like that assumption. I preferred it when the most likely to be popular or wonderful or talented turned out to be the one who *was* the most popular, wonderful, or talented, because that was normally me. Still, in this case, I thought Piper might be right.

I knelt next to the sandals. "These are caligae. Legionnaire's shoes."

I hooked one finger and lifted the shoes by the straps. There wasn't much to them—just leather soles and laces, worn soft and darkened with age. They looked like they'd seen many marches, but they'd been kept well-oiled and lovingly maintained through the centuries.

"Caligae," Piper said. "Like Caligula."

"Exactly," I agreed. "These are the adult version of the little booties that gave Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus his childhood nickname."

Piper wrinkled her nose. "Can you sense any magic?"

"Well, they're not buzzing with energy," I said. "Or giving me flashbacks of stinky feet, or compelling me to put them on. But I think they're the right shoes. These are his namesake. They carry his power."

"Hmm. I suppose if you can talk to an arrow, you can read a pair of sandals."

"It's a gift," I agreed.

She knelt next to me and took one of the sandals. "This won't fit me. Way too big. They look about your size."

“Are you implying I have big feet?”

Her smile flickered. “These look almost as uncomfortable as the shoes of shame—this horrible white pair of nurse’s shoes we had back in the Aphrodite cabin. You’d have to wear them as punishment if you did something bad.”

“That sounds like Aphrodite.”

“I got rid of them,” she said. “But these…I suppose as long as you don’t mind putting your feet where Caligula’s feet have been—”

“DANGER!” cried a voice behind us.

Sneaking up behind someone and yelling *danger* is an excellent way to make them simultaneously leap, spin, and fall on their butts, which is what Piper and I did.

In the doorway stood Crest, his white fur matted and dripping as if he’d flown through Caligula’s swimming pool. His eight-fingered hands wrapped around the door frame on either side. His chest heaved. His black suit was torn to pieces.

“Strixes,” he panted.

My heart leaped into my nasal cavity. “Are they following you?”

He shook his head, his ears rippling like startled squids. “I think I evaded them, but—”

“Why are you here?” Piper demanded, her hand going to her dagger.

The look in Crest’s eyes was a mixture of panic and hunger. He pointed to my ukulele. “You can show me how to play?”

“I…yes,” I said. “Though a guitar might be better, given the size of your hands.”

“That chord,” he said. “The one that made Wah-Wah screech. I want it.”

I rose slowly, so as not to startle him further. “Knowledge of the C minor 6 tri-chord is an awesome responsibility. But, yes, I could show you.”

“And you.” He looked at Piper. “The way you sing. Can you teach me?”

Piper’s hand dropped from her hilt. “I—I guess I could try, but—”

“Then we must leave now!” Crest said. “They have already captured your friends!”

“What?” Piper got to her feet. “Are you sure?”

“The scary girl. The lightning boy. Yes.”

I swallowed back my despair. Crest had given a flawless description of Meg and Jason. “Where?” I asked. “Who has them?”

“Him,” Crest said. “The emperor. His people will be here soon. We must fly! Be the musicians in the world!”

Under different circumstances, I would have considered this excellent advice, but not with our friends captured. I wrapped up the emperor’s sandals and stuffed them into the bottom of my quiver. “Can you take us to our friends?”

“No!” Crest wailed. “You will die! The sorceress—”

Why did Crest not hear the enemies sneaking up behind him? I don’t know. Perhaps Jason’s lightning had left a ringing in his ears. Perhaps he was too distressed, too focused on us to guard his own back.

Whatever the case, Crest hurtled forward, crashing face-first into the box with the winged sandals. He collapsed on the carpet, the freed flying shoes kicking him repeatedly about the head. On his back glistened two deep impressions in the shape of horse hooves.

In the doorway stood a majestic white stallion, his head just clearing the top of the frame. In a flash, I realized why the emperor’s yachts had such tall ceilings, wide hallways and doorways: they were designed to accommodate this horse.

“Incitatus,” I said.

He locked eyes with me as no horse should be able to do—his huge brown pupils glinting with malicious awareness. “Apollo.”

Piper looked stunned, as one does when encountering a talking horse on a shoe yacht.

She began to say, “What the—?”

Incitatus charged. He trampled straight over the coffee table and head-butted Piper against the wall with a sickening crunch. Piper dropped to the carpet.

I rushed toward her, but the horse slammed me away. I landed on the nearest sofa.

“Well, now.” Incitatus surveyed the damage—the overturned pedestals and destroyed coffee table; broken bottles of exotic spring water seeping into the carpet; Crest groaning on the floor, the flying shoes still kicking him; Piper unmoving, blood trickling from her nose; and me on the sofa, cradling my bruised ribs.

“Sorry to intrude on your intrusion,” he said. “I had to knock the girl out quickly, you understand. I don’t like charmspeak.”

His voice was the same as I’d heard while hiding in the dumpster behind Macro’s Military Madness—deep and world-weary, tinged with annoyance, as if he’d seen every possible stupid thing bipeds could do.

I stared in horror at Piper McLean. She didn’t appear to be breathing. I remembered the words of the Sibyl…especially that terrible word that began with *D*.

“You—you killed her,” I stammered.

“Did I?” Incitatus nuzzled Piper’s chest. “Nah. Not yet, but soon enough. Now come along. The emperor wants to see you.”

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30

I'll never leave you
Love will keep us together
Or glue. Glue works too

SOME of my best friends are magic horses.

Arion, the swiftest steed in the world, is my cousin, though he rarely comes to family dinners. The famous winged Pegasus is also a cousin—once removed, I think, since his mother was a gorgon. I'm not sure how that works. And, of course, the sun horses were my favorite steeds—though, thankfully, none of them talked.

Incitatus, however?

I didn't like him much.

He was a beautiful animal—tall and muscular, his coat gleaming like a sunlit cloud. His silky white tail swished behind him as if daring any flies, demigods, or other pests to approach his hindquarters. He wore neither tack nor saddle, though golden horseshoes gleamed on his hooves.

His very majesty grated on me. His jaded voice made me feel small and unimportant. But what I really hated were his eyes. Horse eyes should not be so cold and intelligent.

"Climb on," he said. "My boy is waiting."

"Your *boy*?"

He bared his marble-white teeth. "You know who I mean. Big C. Caligula. The New Sun who's gonna eat you for breakfast."

I sank deeper into the sofa cushions. My heart pounded. I had seen how fast Incitatus could move. I didn't like my chances against him alone. I would never be able to fire an arrow or strum a tune before he kicked my face in.

This would have been an excellent time for a surge of godly strength, so I could throw the horse out the window. Alas, I felt no such energy within me.

Nor could I expect any backup. Piper groaned, twitching her fingers. She

looked half-conscious at best. Crest whimpered and tried to curl into a ball to escape the bullying of the winged shoes.

I rose from the couch, clenched my hands into fists, and forced myself to look Incitatus in the eye.

“I’m still the god Apollo,” I warned. “I’ve faced two emperors already. I beat them both. Don’t test me, horse.”

Incitatus snorted. “Whatever, *Lester*. You’re getting weaker. We’ve been keeping an eye on you. You’ve got hardly anything left. Now quit stalling.”

“And how will you force me to come with you?” I demanded. “You can’t pick me up and throw me on your back. You have no hands! No opposable thumbs! That was your fatal mistake!”

“Yeah, well, I could just kick you in the face. Or…” Incitatus nickered—a sound like someone calling their dog.

Wah-Wah and two of his guards slunk into the room. “You called, Lord Stallion?”

The horse grinned at me. “I don’t need opposable thumbs when I’ve got servants. Granted, they’re *lame* servants that I had to chew free from their own zip ties—”

“Lord Stallion,” Wah-Wah protested. “It was the ukulele! We couldn’t—”

“Load ’em up,” Incitatus ordered, “before you put me in a bad mood.”

Wah-Wah and his helpers threw Piper across the horse’s back. They forced me to climb up behind her, then they bound my hands once again—this time in front, at least, so I could better keep my balance.

Finally, they pulled Crest to his feet. They wrangled the physically abusive winged shoes back into their box, zip-tied Crest’s hands, and force-marched him in front of our grim little parade. We made our way up to the deck, me ducking under every lintel, and retraced our path across the floating bridge of super-yachts.

Incitatus trotted along at an easy pace. Whenever we passed mercenaries or crew members, they knelt and lowered their heads. I wanted to believe they were honoring me, but I suspected they were honoring the horse’s ability to bash their heads in if they didn’t show proper respect.

Crest stumbled. The other pandai hauled him to his feet and prodded him along. Piper kept slipping off the stallion’s back, but I did my best to keep her in place.

Once she muttered, “Uhn-fu.”

Which might have meant *Thank you* or *Untie me* or *Why does my mouth taste like a horseshoe?*

Her dagger, Katoptris, was in easy reach. I stared at the hilt, wondering if I could draw it quickly enough to cut myself free, or plunge it into the horse’s neck.

“I wouldn’t,” Incitatus said.

I stiffened. “What?”

“Use the knife. That’d be a bad move.”

“Are—are you a mind-reader?”

The horse scoffed. “I don’t need to read minds. You know how much you can tell from somebody’s body language when they’re riding your back?”

“I—I can’t say that I’ve had the experience.”

“Well, I could tell what you were planning. So don’t. I’d have to throw you off. Then you and your girlfriend would probably crack your heads and die—”

“She’s not my girlfriend!”

“—and Big C would be annoyed. He wants you to die in a certain way.”

“Ah.” My stomach felt as bruised as my ribs. I wondered if there was a special term for motion sickness while riding a horse on a boat. “So, when you said Caligula would *eat me for breakfast*—”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that literally.”

“Thank the gods.”

“I meant the sorceress Medea will put you in chains and flay your human form to extract whatever remains of your godly essence. Then Caligula will consume your essence—yours and Helios’s both—and make himself the new god of the sun.”

“Oh.” I felt faint. I assumed I still had *some* godly essence inside me—some tiny spark of my former awesomeness that allowed me to remember who I was and what I had once been capable of. I didn’t want those last vestiges of divinity taken away, especially if the process involved flaying. The idea made my stomach churn. I hoped Piper wouldn’t mind terribly if I threw up on her. “You—you seem like a reasonable horse, Incitatus. Why are you helping someone as volatile and treacherous as Caligula?”

Incitatus whinnied. “Volatile, schmolatile. The boy listens to me. He needs me. Doesn’t matter how violent or unpredictable he may seem to others. I can keep him under control, use him to push through my agenda. I’m backing the right horse.”

He didn’t seem to recognize the irony of a horse backing the right horse. Also, I was surprised to hear that Incitatus *had* an agenda. Most equine agendas were fairly straight-forward: food, running, more food, a good brushing. Repeat as desired.

“Does Caligula know that you’re, ah, using him?”

“Of course!” said the horse. “Kid’s not stupid. Once he gets what he wants, well…then we part ways. I intend to overthrow the human race and institute a government by the horses, for the horses.”

“You…what?”

“You think equine self-governance is any crazier than a world ruled by the Olympian gods?”

“I never thought about it.”

“You wouldn’t, would you? You, with your bipedal arrogance! *You* don’t spend your life with humans constantly expecting to *ride* you or have you pull their carts. Ah, I’m wasting my breath. You won’t be around long enough to see the revolution.”

Oh, reader, I can’t express to you my terror—not at the idea of a horse revolution, but at the thought that my life was about to end! Yes, I know mortals face death, too, but it’s *worse* for a god, I tell you! I’d spent millennia knowing I was immune to the great cycle of life and death. Then suddenly I find out—*LOL, not so much!* I was going to be flayed and consumed by a man who took his cues from a militant talking horse!

As we progressed down the chain of super-yachts, we saw more and more signs of recent battle. Boat twenty looked like it had been struck repeatedly with lightning. Its superstructure was a charred, smoking ruin, the blackened upper decks spackled with fire-extinguisher foam.

Boat eighteen had been converted into a triage center. The wounded were sprawled everywhere, groaning from bashed heads, broken limbs, bleeding noses, and bruised groins. Many of their injuries were at knee level or below—just where Meg McCaffrey liked to kick. A flock of strixes wheeled overhead, screeching hungrily. Perhaps they were just on guard duty, but I got the feeling they were waiting to see which of the wounded did not pull through.

Boat fourteen was Meg McCaffrey’s coup de grace. Boston ivy had engulfed the entire yacht, including most of the crew, who were stitched to the walls by a thick web of crawlers. A cadre of horticulturists—no doubt called up from the botanical gardens on boat sixteen—were now trying to free their comrades using clippers and weed-whackers.

I was heartened to see that our friends had made it this far and caused so much damage. Perhaps Crest had been mistaken about them being captured. Surely two capable demigods like Jason and Meg would have managed to escape if they got cornered. I was counting on it, since I now needed them to rescue me.

But what if they could not? I racked my brain for clever ideas and devious schemes. Rather than racing, my mind moved at a wheezing jog.

I managed to come up with phase one of my master plan: I would escape without getting myself killed, then free my friends. I was hard at work on phase two—*how do I do that?*—when I ran out of time. Incitatus crossed to the deck of *Julia Drusilla XII*, cantered through a set of double golden doors, and carried us down a ramp into the ship’s interior, which contained a single massive room—the audience chamber of Caligula.

Entering this space was like plunging down the throat of a sea monster.

I'm sure the effect was intentional. The emperor wanted you to feel a sense of panic and helplessness.

You have been swallowed, the room seemed to say. *Now you will be digested.*

No windows here. The fifty-foot-high walls screamed with garishly painted frescoes of battles, volcanoes, storms, wild parties—all images of power gone amok, boundaries erased, nature overturned.

The tiled floor was a similar study in chaos—intricate, nightmarish mosaics of the gods being devoured by various monsters. Far above, the ceiling was painted black, and dangling from it were golden candelabras, skeletons in cages, and bare swords that hung by the thinnest of cords and looked ready to impale anyone below.

I found myself tilting sideways on Incitatus's back, trying to find my equilibrium, but it was impossible. The chamber offered no safe place to rest my gaze. The rocking of the yacht didn't help.

Standing guard along the length of the throne room were a dozen pandai—six to port and six to starboard. They held gold-tipped spears and wore golden chain mail from head to foot, including giant metal flaps over their ears that, when struck, must have given them terrible tinnitus.

At the far end of the room, where the boat's hull narrowed to a point, the emperor had set his dais—putting his back to the corner like any good paranoid ruler. Before him swirled two columns of wind and debris that I couldn't quite make sense of—some sort of ventus performance art?

At the emperor's right hand stood another pandos dressed in the full regalia of a praetorian commander—Reverb, I guessed, captain of the guard. To the emperor's left stood Medea, her eyes gleaming with triumph.

The emperor himself was much as I remembered—young and lithe, handsome enough, though his eyes were too far apart, his ears too prominent (but not in comparison to the pandai), his smile too thin.

He was dressed in white slacks, white boat shoes, a striped blue-and-white shirt, a blue blazer, and a captain's hat. I had a horrible flashback to 1975, when I'd made the mistake of blessing Captain and Tennille with their hit single "Love Will Keep Us Together." If Caligula was the Captain, that made Medea *Tennille*, which felt wrong on so many levels. I tried to push the thought from my mind.

As our procession approached the throne, Caligula leaned forward and rubbed his hands, as if the next course of his dinner had just arrived.

"Perfect timing!" he said. "I've been having the most fascinating conversation with your friends."

My friends?

Only then did my brain allow me to process what was inside the swirling columns of wind.

In one hovered Jason Grace. In the other, Meg McCaffrey. Both struggled helplessly. Both screamed without making a sound. Their tornado prisons whirled with glittering shrapnel—tiny pieces of Celestial bronze and Imperial gold that sliced at their clothes and skin, slowly cutting them to pieces.

Caligula rose, his placid brown eyes fixed on me. “Incitatus, this can’t actually be him, can it?”

“Afraid so, pal,” said the horse. “May I present the pathetic excuse for a god, Apollo, also known as Lester Papadopoulos.”

The stallion knelt on his forelegs, spilling Piper and me onto the floor.

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31

I give you my heart
I mean metaphorically
Put away that knife

I could think of many names to call Caligula. *Pal* was not one of them.

Nevertheless, Incitatus seemed perfectly at home in the emperor's presence. He trotted to starboard, where two pandai began brushing his coat while a third knelt to offer him oats from a golden bucket.

Jason Grace lashed out in his wind tunnel of shrapnel, trying to break free. He cast a distressed look at Piper and yelled something I couldn't hear. In the other wind column, Meg floated with her arms and legs crossed, scowling like an angry genie, ignoring the bits of metal cutting her face.

Caligula stepped down from his dais. He strolled between the wind columns with a jaunty lilt in his step, no doubt the effect of wearing a yacht-captain outfit. He stopped a few feet in front of me. In his open palm, he bounced two small bits of gold—Meg McCaffrey's rings.

"This must be the lovely Piper McLean." He frowned down at her, as if just realizing she was barely conscious. "Why is she like this? I can't taunt her in this condition. Reverb!"

The praetor commander snapped his fingers. Two guards shuffled forward and dragged Piper to her feet. One waved a small bottle under her nose—smelling salts, perhaps, or some vile magical equivalent of Medea's.

Piper's head snapped back. A shudder ran through her body, then she pushed the pandai away.

"I'm fine." She blinked at her surroundings, saw Jason and Meg in their wind columns, then glared at Caligula. She struggled to pull her knife, but her fingers didn't seem to work. "I'll *kill* you."

Caligula chuckled. "That would be amusing, my love. But let's not kill each other quite yet, eh? Tonight, I have other priorities."

He beamed at me. “Oh, Lester. What a *gift* Jupiter has given me!” He walked a circuit around me, running his fingertips along my shoulders as if checking for dust. I suppose I should have attacked him, but Caligula radiated such cool confidence, such a powerful aura that it befuddled my mind.

“Not much left of your godliness, is there?” he said. “Don’t worry. Medea will coax it out of you. Then I’ll take revenge on Zeus *for* you. Have some comfort in that.”

“I—I don’t want revenge.”

“Of course you do! It will be wonderful, just wait and see….Well, actually, you’ll be dead, but you’ll have to trust me. I’ll make you proud.”

“Caesar,” Medea called from her side of the dais, “perhaps we could begin soon?”

She did her best to hide it, but I heard the strain in her voice. As I’d seen in the parking garage of death, even Medea had her limits. Keeping Meg and Jason in twin tornadoes must have required a great deal of her strength. She couldn’t possibly maintain her ventus prisons *and* do whatever magic she needed to de-god me. If only I could figure out how to exploit that weakness…

Annoyance flickered across Caligula’s face. “Yes, yes, Medea. In a moment. First, I must greet my loyal servants….” He turned to the pandai who’d accompanied us from the ship of shoes. “Which of you is Wah-Wah?”

Wah-Wah bowed, his ears spreading across the mosaic floor. “H-here, sire.”

“Served me well, have you?”

“Yes, sire!”

“Until today.”

The pandos looked like he was trying to swallow Tiny Tim’s ukulele. “They—they tricked us, lord! With horrible music!”

“I see,” Caligula said. “And how do you intend to make this right? How can I be sure of your loyalty?”

“I—I pledge you my heart, sire! Now and always! My men and I—” He clamped his huge hands over his mouth.

Caligula smiled blandly. “Oh, Reverb?”

His praetor commander stepped forward. “Lord?”

“You heard Wah-Wah?”

“Yes, lord,” Reverb agreed. “His heart is yours. And also his men’s hearts.”

“Well, then.” Caligula flicked his fingers in a vague *go away* gesture. “Take them outside and collect what is mine.”

The throne-room guards from the port side marched forward and seized Wah-Wah and his two lieutenants by the arms.

“No!” Wah-Wah screamed. “No, I—I didn’t mean—!”

He and his men thrashed and sobbed, but it was no use. The golden-armored pandai dragged them away.

Reverb gestured at Crest, who stood trembling and whimpering next to Piper. “What about this one, sire?”

Caligula narrowed his eyes. “Remind me why this one has white fur?”

“He’s young, sire,” Reverb said, not a trace of sympathy in his voice. “Our people’s fur darkens with age.”

“I see.” Caligula stroked Crest’s face with the back of his hand, causing the young pandos to whimper even louder. “Leave him. He’s amusing, and he seems harmless enough. Now shoo, Commander. Bring me those hearts.”

Reverb bowed and hurried after his men.

My pulse hammered in my temples. I wanted to convince myself things were not so bad. Half the emperor’s guards and their commander had just left. Medea was under the strain of controlling two venti. That meant only six elite pandai, a killer horse, and an immortal emperor to deal with. Now was the optimal time for me to execute my clever plan…if only I had one.

Caligula stepped to my side. He threw his arm around me like an old friend. “You see, Apollo? I’m not *crazy*. I’m not *cruel*. I just take people at their word. If you promise me your life, or your heart, or your wealth…then you should *mean* it, don’t you think?”

My eyes watered. I was too afraid to blink.

“Your friend Piper, for instance,” Caligula said. “She wanted to spend time with her dad. She resented his career. So, guess what? I took that career away! If she’d just gone to Oklahoma with him, like they’d planned, she could’ve gotten what she wanted! But does she thank me? No. She comes here to kill me.”

“I *will*,” Piper said, her voice a bit steadier. “Take my word on that.”

“Exactly my point,” Caligula said. “No gratitude.”

He patted me on the chest, sending starbursts of pain across my bruised ribs. “And Jason Grace? He wants to be a priest or something, build shrines to the gods. Fine! I *am* a god. I have no problem with that! Then he comes here to wreck my yachts with lightning. Is that priestlike behavior? I don’t think so.”

He strolled toward the swirling columns of wind. This left his back exposed, but neither Piper nor I moved to attack him. Even now, recalling it, I cannot tell you why. I felt so powerless, as if I were caught in a vision that had happened centuries before. For the first time, I sensed what it would be like if the Triumvirate controlled every Oracle. They would not just foresee the future—they would shape it. Their every word would become inexorable destiny.

“And this one.” Caligula studied Meg McCaffrey. “Her father once swore he wouldn’t rest until he reincarnated the blood-born, the silver wives! Can

you *believe* it?”

Blood-born. Silver wives. Those words sent a jolt through my nervous system. I felt I should know what they meant, how they related to the seven green seeds Meg had planted on the hillside. As usual, my human brain screamed in protest as I attempted to dredge the information from its depths. I could almost see the annoying FILE NOT FOUND message flashing behind my eyes.

Caligula grinned. “Well, of course I took Dr. McCaffrey at his word! I burned his stronghold to the ground. But honestly, I thought I was quite generous to let him and his daughter live. Little Meg had a wonderful life with my nephew Nero. If she’d just kept her promises to him…” He wagged his finger disapprovingly at her.

On the starboard side of the room, Incitatus looked up from his golden oat bucket and belched. “Hey, Big C? Great speech and all. But shouldn’t we kill the two in the whirlwinds so Medea can turn her attention to flaying Lester alive? I really want to see that.”

“Yes, please,” Medea agreed, her teeth clenched.

“NO!” Piper shouted. “Caligula, let my friends go.”

Unfortunately, she could barely stand up straight. Her voice shook.

Caligula chuckled. “My love, I’ve been trained to resist charmspeak by Medea herself. You’ll have to do better than that if—”

“Incitatus,” Piper called, her voice a little stronger, “kick Medea in the head.”

Incitatus flared his nostrils. “I think I’ll kick Medea in the head.”

“No, you won’t!” Medea shrieked in a sharp burst of charmspeak. “Caligula, silence the girl!”

Caligula strode over to Piper. “Sorry, love.”

He backhanded her across the mouth so hard she turned a full circle before collapsing.

“OHHH!” Incitatus whinnied with pleasure. “Good one!”

I broke.

Never had I felt such rage. Not when I destroyed the entire family of Niobids for their insults. Not when I fought Heracles in the chamber of Delphi. Not even when I struck down the Cyclopes who had made my father’s murderous lightning.

I decided at that moment Piper McLean would not die tonight. I charged Caligula, intent on wrapping my hands around his neck. I wanted to strangle him to death, if only to wipe that smug smile off his face.

I felt sure my godly power would return. I would rip the emperor apart in my righteous fury.

Instead, Caligula pushed me to the floor with hardly a glance.

“Please, Lester,” he said. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Piper lay shivering as if she were cold.

Crest crouched nearby, trying in vain to cover his massive ears. No doubt he was regretting his decision to follow his dream of taking music lessons.

I fixed my eyes on the twin cyclones, hoping that Jason and Meg had somehow escaped. They had not, but strangely, as if by silent agreement, they seemed to have switched roles.

Rather than raging in response to Piper being struck, Jason now floated deathly still, his eyes closed, his face like stone. Meg, on the other hand, clawed at her ventus cage, screaming words I couldn't hear. Her clothes were in tatters. Her face was crosshatched with a dozen bleeding cuts, but she didn't seem to care. She kicked and punched and threw packets of seeds into the maelstrom, causing festive bursts of pansies and daffodils among the shrapnel.

By the imperial dais, Medea had turned pale and sweaty. Countering Piper's charmspeak must have taxed her, but that gave me no comfort.

Reverb and his guards would soon be back, bearing the hearts of the emperor's enemies.

A cold thought flooded through me. *The hearts of his enemies.*

I felt as if *I* had been backhanded. The emperor needed me alive, at least for the moment. Which meant my only leverage…

My expression must have been priceless. Caligula burst out laughing.

"Apollo, you look like someone stepped on your favorite lyre!" He tutted. "You think you've had it bad? I grew up as a hostage in my Uncle Tiberius's palace. Do you have *any* idea how evil that man was? I woke up every day expecting to be assassinated, just like the rest of my family. I became a consummate actor. Whatever Tiberius needed me to be, I was. And *I survived*. But you? Your life has been golden from start to finish. You don't have the stamina to be mortal."

He turned to Medea. "Very well, sorceress! You may turn your little blenders up to *puree* and kill the two prisoners. Then we will deal with Apollo."

Medea smiled. "Gladly."

"Wait!" I screamed, pulling an arrow from my quiver.

The emperor's remaining guards leveled their spears, but the emperor shouted, "HOLD!"

I didn't try to draw my bow. I didn't attack Caligula. Instead, I turned the arrow inward and pressed the point against my chest.

Caligula's smile evaporated. He examined me with thinly veiled contempt. "Lester…what are you doing?"

"Let my friends go," I said. "All of them. Then you can have me."

The emperor's eyes gleamed like a strix's. "And if I don't?"

I summoned my courage, and issued a threat I never could have imagined

in my previous four thousand years of life. “I’ll kill myself.”

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Don't make me do it
I'm crazy, I'll do it, I'll—
Ow, that really hurt

OH, *No, Thou Shalt* Not, buzzed a voice in my head.

My noble gesture was ruined when I realized I had, once again, drawn the Arrow of Dodona by mistake. It shook violently in my hand, no doubt making me look even more terrified than I was. Nevertheless, I held it fast.

Caligula narrowed his eyes. "You would never. You don't have a self-sacrificing instinct in your body!"

"Let them go." I pressed the arrow against my skin, hard enough to draw blood. "Or you'll never be the sun god."

The arrow hummed angrily, *KILLETH THYSELF WITH SOME OTHER PROJECTILE, KNAVE. OF COMMON MURDER WEAPONS, I AM NONE!*

"Oh, Medea," Caligula called over his shoulder, "if he kills himself in this fashion, can you still do your magic?"

"You *know* I can't," she complained. "It's a complicated ritual! We can't have him murdering himself in some sloppy way before I'm prepared."

"Well, that's mildly annoying." Caligula sighed. "Look, Apollo, you can't expect this will have a happy ending. I am not Commodus. I'm not playing a game. Be a nice boy and let Medea kill you in the correct way. Then I'll give these others a painless death. That's my best offer."

I decided Caligula would make a terrible car salesman.

Next to me, Piper shivered on the floor, her neural pathways probably overloaded by trauma. Crest had wrapped himself in his own ears. Jason continued to meditate in his cone of swirling shrapnel, though I couldn't imagine he would achieve nirvana under those circumstances.

Meg yelled and gesticulated at me, perhaps telling me not to be a fool and put down the arrow. I took no pleasure in the fact that, for once, I couldn't

hear her orders.

The emperor's guards stayed where they were, gripping their spears. Incitatus munched his oats like he was at the movies.

"Last chance," Caligula said.

Somewhere behind me, at the top of the ramp, a voice called, "My lord!"

Caligula looked over. "What is it, Flange? I'm a little busy here."

"N-news, my lord."

"Later."

"Sire, it's about the northern attack."

I felt a surge of hope. The assault on New Rome was happening tonight. I didn't have the good hearing of a pandos, but the hysterical urgency in Flange's tone was unmistakable. He was *not* bringing the emperor good news.

Caligula's expression soured. "Come here, then. And don't touch the idiot with the arrow."

The pandos Flange shuffled past me and whispered something in the emperor's ear. Caligula may have considered himself a consummate actor, but he didn't do a good job of hiding his disgust.

"How disappointing." He tossed Meg's golden rings aside like they were worthless pebbles. "Your sword, please, Flange."

"I—" Flange fumbled for his khanda. "Y-yes, lord."

Caligula examined the blunt serrated blade, then returned it to its owner with vicious force, plunging it into the poor pandos's gut. Flange howled as he crumbled to dust.

Caligula faced me. "Now, where were we?"

"Your northern attack," I said. "Didn't go so well?"

It was foolish of me to goad him, but I couldn't help it. At that moment, I wasn't any more rational than Meg McCaffrey—I just wanted to hurt Caligula, to smash everything he owned to dust.

He waved aside my question. "Some jobs I have to do myself. That's fine. You'd think a *Roman* demigod camp would obey orders from a *Roman* emperor, but alas."

"The Twelfth Legion has a long history of supporting *good* emperors," I said. "And of deposing bad ones."

Caligula's left eye twitched. "Oh, Boost, where are you?"

On the port side, one of the horse-groomer pandai dropped his brush in alarm. "Yes, lord?"

"Take your men," Caligula said. "Spread the word. We break formation immediately and sail north. We have unfinished business in the Bay Area."

"But, sire…" Boost looked at me, as if deciding whether I was enough of a threat to warrant leaving the emperor without his remaining guards. "Yes, sire."

The rest of the pandai shuffled off, leaving Incitatus without anyone to

hold his golden oat bucket.

"Hey, C," said the stallion. "Aren't you putting the cart before the horse? Before we head off to war, you've got to finish your business with Lester."

"Oh, I will," Caligula promised. "Now, Lester, we both know you're not going to—"

He lunged with blinding speed, making a grab for the arrow. I'd been anticipating that. Before he could stop me, I cleverly plunged the arrow into my chest. Ha! That would teach Caligula to underestimate me!

Dear reader, it takes a great deal of willpower to intentionally harm yourself. And not the *good* kind of willpower—the stupid, reckless kind you should *never* try to summon, even in an effort to save your friends.

As I stabbed myself, I was shocked by the sheer amount of pain I experienced. Why did killing yourself have to *hurt* so much?

My bone marrow turned to lava. My lungs filled with hot wet sand. Blood soaked my shirt and I fell to my knees, gasping and dizzy. The world spun around me as if the entire throne room had become a giant ventus prison.

VILLAINY! The Arrow of Dodona's voice buzzed in my mind (and now also in my chest). *THOU DIDST NOT JUST IMPALE ME HEREIN! O, VILE, MONSTROUS FLESH!*

A distant part of my brain thought it was unfair for him to complain, since I was the one dying, but I couldn't have spoken even if I'd wanted to.

Caligula rushed forward. He grabbed the shaft of the arrow, but Medea yelled, "Stop!"

She ran across the throne room and knelt at my side.

"Pulling out the arrow could make matters worse!" she hissed.

"He stabbed himself in the chest," Caligula said. "How can it be worse?"

"Fool," she muttered. I wasn't sure whether the comment was directed at me or Caligula. "I don't want him to bleed out." She removed a black silk bag from her belt, pulled out a stoppered glass vial, and shoved the bag at Caligula. "Hold this."

She uncorked the vial and poured its contents over the entry wound.

COLD! complained the Arrow of Dodona. *COLD! COLD!*

Personally, I didn't feel a thing. The searing pain had become a dull, throbbing ache throughout my whole body. I was pretty sure that was a bad sign.

Incitatus trotted over. "Whoa, he really did it. That's a horse of a different color."

Medea examined the wound. She cursed in ancient Colchian, calling into question my mother's past romantic relationships.

"This idiot can't even *kill* himself right," grumbled the sorceress. "It appears that, somehow, he missed his heart."

’TWAS ME, WITCH! the arrow intoned from within my rib cage. *DOST THOU THINK I WOULD FAIN ALLOW MYSELF TO BE EMBEDDED IN THE DISGUSTING HEART OF LESTER? I DODGED AND WEAVED!*

I made a mental note to either thank or break the Arrow of Dodona later, whichever made the most sense at the time.

Medea snapped her fingers at the emperor. “Hand me the red vial.”

Caligula scowled, clearly not used to playing surgical nurse. “I never rummage through a woman’s purse. Especially a sorceress’s.”

I thought this was the surest sign yet that he was perfectly sane.

“If you want to be the sun god,” Medea snarled, “do it!”

Caligula found the red vial.

Medea coated her right hand with the gooey contents. With her left, she grabbed the Arrow of Dodona and yanked it from my chest.

I screamed. My vision went dark. My left pectorals felt like they were being excavated with a drill bit. When I regained my sight, I found the arrow wound plugged with a thick red substance like the wax of a letter seal. The pain was horrible, unbearable, but I could breathe again.

If I hadn’t been so miserable, I might have smiled in triumph. I had been counting on Medea’s healing powers. She was almost as skilled as my son Asclepius, though her bedside manner was not as good, and her cures tended to involve dark magic, vile ingredients, and the tears of small children.

I had not, of course, expected Caligula to let my friends go. But I had hoped, with Medea distracted, she might lose control of her venti. And so she did.

That moment is fixed in my mind: Incitatus peering down at me, his muzzle flecked with oats; the sorceress Medea examining my wound, her hands sticky with blood and magic paste; Caligula standing over me, his splendid white slacks and shoes freckled with my blood; and Piper and Crest on the floor nearby, their presence momentarily forgotten by our captors. Even Meg seemed frozen within her churning prison, horrified by what I had done.

That was the last moment before everything went wrong, before our great tragedy unspooled—when Jason Grace thrust out his arms, and the cages of wind exploded.

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33

No good news awaits
I warned you right at the start
Turn away, reader

ONE tornado can ruin your whole day.

I'd seen the sort of devastation Zeus could wreak when he got angry at Kansas. So I was not surprised when the two shrapnel-filled wind spirits ripped through the *Julia Drusilla XII* like chain saws.

We all should have died in the blast. Of that I'm certain. But Jason channeled the explosion up, down, and sideways in a two-dimensional wave—blasting through the port and starboard walls; bursting through the black ceiling that showered us with golden candelabras and swords; jackhammering through the mosaic floor into the bowels of the ship. The yacht groaned and shook—metal, wood, and fiberglass snapping like bones in the mouth of a monster.

Incitatus and Caligula stumbled in one direction, Medea in the other. None of them suffered so much as a scratch. Meg McCaffrey, unfortunately, was on Jason's left. When the venti exploded, she flew sideways through a newly made rent in the wall and disappeared into the dark.

I tried to scream. I think it came out as more of a death rattle, though. With the explosion ringing in my ears, I couldn't be sure.

I could barely move. There was no chance I could go after my young friend. I cast around desperately and fixed my gaze on Crest.

The young pandos's eyes were so wide they almost matched his ears. A golden sword had fallen from the ceiling and impaled itself in the tile floor between his legs.

"Rescue Meg," I croaked, "and I will teach you how to play any instrument you wish."

I didn't know how even a pandos could hear me, but Crest seemed to. His

expression changed from shock to reckless determination. He scrambled across the tilting floor, spread his ears, and leaped into the rift.

The break in the floor began to widen, cutting us off from Jason. Ten-foot-tall waterfalls poured in from the damaged hull to port and starboard—washing the mosaic floors in dark water and flotsam, spilling into the widening chasm in the center of the room. Below, broken machinery steamed. Flames guttered as seawater filled the hold. Above, lining the edges of the shattered ceiling, pandai appeared, screaming and drawing weapons—until the sky lit up and tendrils of lightning blasted the guards into dust.

Jason stepped out of the smoke on the opposite side of the throne room, his gladius in his hand.

Caligula snarled. "You're one of those Camp Jupiter brats, aren't you?"

"I'm Jason Grace," he said. "Former praetor of the Twelfth Legion. Son of Jupiter. Child of Rome. But I belong to both camps."

"Good enough," Caligula said. "I'll hold *you* responsible for Camp Jupiter's treason tonight. Incitatus!"

The emperor snatched up a golden spear that was rolling across the floor. He vaulted onto his stallion's back, charged the chasm, and leaped it in a single bound. Jason threw himself aside to avoid getting trampled.

From somewhere to my left came a howl of anger. Piper McLean had risen. Her lower face was a nightmare—her swollen upper lip split across her teeth, her jaw askew, a trickle of blood coming from the edge of her mouth.

She charged Medea, who turned just in time to catch Piper's fist in her nose. The sorceress stumbled, pinwheeling her arms as Piper pushed her over the edge of the chasm. The sorceress disappeared into the churning soup of burning fuel and seawater.

Piper shouted at Jason. She might have been saying *COME ON!* But all that came out was a guttural cry.

Jason was a little busy. He dodged Incitatus's charge, parrying Caligula's spear with his sword, but he was moving slowly. I could only guess how much energy he'd expended controlling the winds and the lightning.

"Get out of here!" he called to us. "Go!"

An arrow sprouted from his left thigh. Jason grunted and stumbled. Above us, more pandai had gathered, despite the threat of severe thunderstorms.

Piper yelled in warning as Caligula charged again. Jason just managed to roll aside. He made a grabbing gesture at the air, and a gust of wind yanked him aloft. Suddenly he sat astride a miniature storm cloud with four funnel clouds for legs and a mane that crackled with lightning—Tempest, his ventus steed.

He rode against Caligula, jousting sword versus spear. Another arrow took Jason in the upper arm.

"I told you this isn't a game!" yelled Caligula. "You don't walk away

from me alive!”

Below, an explosion rocked the ship. The room split farther apart. Piper staggered, which probably saved her life; three arrows hit the spot where she’d been standing.

Somehow, she pulled me to my feet. I was clutching the Arrow of Dodona, though I had no memory of picking it up. I saw no sign of Crest, or Meg, or even Medea. An arrow sprouted from the toe of my shoe. I was in so much pain already I couldn’t tell if it had pierced my foot or not.

Piper tugged at my arm. She pointed to Jason, her words urgent but unintelligible. I wanted to help him, but what could I do? I’d just stabbed myself in the chest. I was pretty sure that if I sneezed too hard, I would displace the red plug in my wound and bleed to death. I couldn’t draw a bow or even strum a ukulele. Meanwhile, on the broken roof line above us, more and more pandai appeared, eager to help me commit arrowcide.

Piper was no better off. The fact that she was on her feet at all was a miracle—the sort of miracle that comes back to kill you later when the adrenaline wears off.

Nevertheless, how could we leave?

I watched in horror as Jason and Caligula fought, Jason bleeding from arrows in each limb now, yet somehow still able to raise his sword. The space was too small for two men on horses, yet they circled one another, trading blows. Incitatus kicked at Tempest with his golden-shod front hooves. The ventus responded with bursts of electricity that scorched the stallion’s white flanks.

As the former praetor and the emperor charged past each other, Jason met my eyes across the ruined throne room. His expression told me his plan with perfect clarity. Like me, he had decided that Piper McLean would not die tonight. For some reason, he had decided that I must live too.

He yelled again, “GO! Remember!”

I was slow, dumbstruck. Jason held my gaze a fraction of a second too long, perhaps to make sure that last word sank in: *remember*—the promise he had extracted from me a million years ago this morning, in his Pasadena dorm room.

While Jason’s back was turned, Caligula wheeled about. He threw his spear, driving its point between Jason’s shoulder blades. Piper screamed. Jason stiffened, his blue eyes wide in shock.

He slumped forward, wrapping his arms around Tempest’s neck. His lips moved, as if he was whispering something to his steed.

Carry him away! I prayed, knowing that no god would listen. *Please, just let Tempest get him to safety!*

Jason toppled from his steed. He hit the deck facedown, the spear still in his back, his gladius clattering from his hand.

Incitatus trotted up to the fallen demigod. Arrows continued to rain around us.

Caligula stared at me across the chasm—giving me the same displeased scowl my father used to before inflicting one of his punishments: *Now look what you've made me do.*

"I warned you," Caligula said. Then he glanced at the pandai above. "Leave Apollo alive. He's no threat. But kill the girl."

Piper howled, shaking with impotent rage. I stepped in front of her and waited for death, wondering with cold detachment where the first arrow might strike. I watched as Caligula plucked out his spear, then drove it again into Jason's back, removing any last hope that our friend might still be alive.

As the pandai drew their bows and took aim, the air crackled with charged ozone. The winds swirled around us. Suddenly Piper and I were whisked from the burning shell of the *Julia Drusilla XII* on the back of Tempest—the ventus carrying out Jason's last orders to get us safely away, whether we wanted it or not.

I sobbed in despair as we shot across the surface of Santa Barbara Harbor, the sounds of explosions still rumbling behind us.

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Surfing accident
My new euphemism for
Worst evening ever

FOR the next few hours, my mind deserted me.

I do not remember Tempest dropping us on the beach, though he must have done so. I recall moments of Piper yelling at me, or sitting in the surf shuddering with dry sobs, or uselessly clawing gobs of wet sand and throwing them at the waves. A few times, she slapped away the ambrosia and nectar I tried to give her.

I remember slowly pacing the thin stretch of beach, my feet bare, my shirt cold from the seawater. The plug of healing goo throbbed in my chest, leaking a little blood from time to time.

We were no longer in Santa Barbara. There was no harbor, no string of super-yachts, just the dark Pacific stretching before us. Behind us loomed a dark cliff. A zigzag of wooden stairs led up toward the lights of a house at the top.

Meg McCaffrey was there too. Wait. When did Meg arrive? She was thoroughly drenched, her clothes shredded, her face and arms a war zone of bruises and cuts. She sat next to Piper, sharing ambrosia. I suppose *my* ambrosia wasn't good enough. The pandos Crest squatted some distance away at the base of the cliff, eyeing me hungrily as if waiting for his first music lesson to begin. The pandos must have done what I'd asked. Somehow, he'd found Meg, pulled her from the sea, and flown her here…wherever *here* was.

The thing I remember most clearly is Piper saying *He's not dead*.

She said this over and over, as soon as she could manage the words, once the nectar and ambrosia tamed the swelling around her mouth. She still looked awful. Her upper lip needed stitches. She would definitely have a scar. Her jaw, chin, and lower lip were one gigantic eggplant-colored bruise. I

suspected her dentist bill would be hefty. Still, she forced out the words with steady determination. “He’s not dead.”

Meg held her shoulder. “Maybe. We’ll find out. You need to rest and heal.”

I stared incredulously at my young master. “*Maybe?* Meg, you didn’t see what happened! He…Jason…the spear—”

Meg glared at me. She did not say *Shut up,* but I heard the order loud and clear. On her hands, her gold rings glinted, though I didn’t know how she could have retrieved them. Perhaps, like so many magic weapons, they automatically returned to their owner if lost. It would be like Nero to give his stepdaughter such clingy gifts.

“Tempest will find Jason,” Meg insisted. “We just have to wait.”

Tempest…right. After the ventus had brought Piper and me here, I vaguely remembered Piper harassing the spirit, using garbled words and gestures to order him back to the yachts to find Jason. Tempest had raced off across the surface of the sea like an electrified waterspout.

Now, staring at the horizon, I wondered if I could dare hope for good news.

My memories from the ship were coming back, piecing themselves together into a fresco more horrible than anything painted on Caligula’s walls.

The emperor had warned me: *This is not a game.* He was indeed not Commodus. As much as Caligula loved theatrics, he would never mess up an execution by adding glitzy special effects, ostriches, basketballs, race cars, and loud music. Caligula did not *pretend* to kill. He killed.

“He’s not dead.” Piper repeated her mantra, as if trying to charmspeak herself as well as us. “He’s gone through too much to die now, like that.”

I wanted to believe her.

Sadly, I had witnessed tens of thousands of mortal deaths. Few of them had any meaning. Most were untimely, unexpected, undignified, and at least slightly embarrassing. The people who deserved to die took forever to do so. Those who deserved to live always went too soon.

Falling in combat against an evil emperor in order to save one’s friends… that seemed all too plausible a death for a hero like Jason Grace. He’d *told* me what the Erythraean Sibyl said. If I hadn’t asked him to come with us—

Don’t blame yourself, said Selfish Apollo. *It was his choice.*

It was my *quest!* said Guilty Apollo. *If not for me, Jason would be safe in his dorm room, sketching new shrines for obscure minor deities! Piper McLean would be unharmed, spending time with her father, preparing for a new life in Oklahoma.*

Selfish Apollo had nothing to say to this, or he kept it selfishly to himself.

I could only watch the sea and wait, hoping that Jason Grace would come

riding out of the darkness alive and well.

At last, the smell of ozone laced the air. Lightning flashed across the surface of the water. Tempest charged ashore, a dark form laid across his back like a saddlebag.

The wind horse knelt. He gently spilled Jason onto the sand. Piper shouted and ran to his side. Meg followed. The most horrible thing was the momentary look of relief on their faces, before it was crushed.

Jason's skin was the color of blank parchment, speckled with slime, sand, and foam. The sea had washed away the blood, but his school dress shirt was stained as purple as a senatorial sash. Arrows protruded from his arms and legs. His right hand was fixed in a pointing gesture, as if he were still telling us to go. His expression didn't seem tortured or scared. He looked at peace, as if he'd just managed to fall asleep after a hard day. I didn't want to wake him.

Piper shook him and sobbed, "JASON!" Her voice echoed from the cliffs.

Meg's face settled into a hard scowl. She sat back on her haunches and looked up at me. "Fix him."

The force of the command pulled me forward, made me kneel at Jason's side. I put my hand on Jason's cold forehead, which only confirmed the obvious. "Meg, I cannot fix death. I wish I could."

"There's always a way," Piper said. "The physician's cure! Leo took it!"

I shook my head. "Leo had the cure ready at the moment he died," I said gently. "He went through many hardships in advance to get the ingredients. Even then, he needed Asclepius to make it. That wouldn't work here, not for Jason. I'm so sorry, Piper. It's too late."

"No," she insisted. "No, the Cherokee always taught…" She took a shaky breath, as if steeling herself for the pain of speaking so many words. "One of the most important stories. Back when man first started destroying nature, the animals decided he was a threat. They all vowed to fight back. Each animal had a different way to kill humans. But the plants…they were kind and compassionate. They vowed the *opposite*—that they'd each find their own way to protect people. So, there's a plant cure for everything, whatever disease or poison or wound. *Some* plant has the cure. You just have to know which one!"

I grimaced. "Piper, that story holds a great deal of wisdom. But even if I were still a god, I couldn't offer you a remedy to bring back the dead. If such a thing existed, Hades would never allow its use."

"The Doors of Death, then!" she said. "*Medea* came back that way! Why not Jason? There's always a way to cheat the system. Help me!"

Her charmspeak washed over me, as powerful as Meg's order. Then I looked at Jason's peaceful expression.

"Piper," I said, "you and Jason fought to *close* the Doors of Death. Because you knew it was not right to let the dead back into the world of the

living. Jason Grace struck me as many things, but he wasn't a cheater. Would he want you to rend the heavens and the earth and the Underworld to bring him back?"

Her eyes flashed angrily. "You don't care because you're a god. You'll go back to Olympus after you free the Oracles, so what does it matter? You're using us to get what you want, like all the other gods."

"Hey," Meg said, gently but firmly. "That won't help."

Piper pressed a hand on Jason's chest. "What did he die for, Apollo? A pair of *shoes*?"

A jolt of panic almost blew out my chest plug. I'd entirely forgotten about the shoes. I tugged the quiver from my back and turned it upside down, shaking out the arrows.

The rolled-up sandals of Caligula tumbled onto the beach.

"They're here." I scooped them up, my hands trembling. "At least—at least we have them."

Piper let out a broken sob. She stroked Jason's hair. "Yeah, yeah, that's great. You can go see your Oracle now. The Oracle that got him KILLED!"

Somewhere behind me, partway up the cliff, a man's voice cried out, "Piper?"

Tempest fled, bursting into wind and raindrops.

Hurrying down the cliffside stairs, in plaid pajama pants and a white T-shirt, came Tristan McLean.

Of course, I realized. Tempest had brought us to the McLean house in Malibu. Somehow, he had known to come here. Piper's father must have heard her cries all the way from the top of the cliff.

He ran toward us, his flip-flops slapping against his soles, sand spraying around the cuffs of his pants, his shirt rippling in the wind. His dark disheveled hair blew in his eyes, but it did not hide his look of alarm.

"Piper, I was waiting for you!" he called. "I was on the terrace and—"

He froze, first seeing his daughter's brutalized face, then the body lying on the sand.

"Oh, no, no." He rushed to Piper. "What—what is—? Who—?"

Having assured himself that Piper was not in imminent danger of dying, he knelt next to Jason and put his hand against the boy's neck, checking for a pulse. He put his ear to Jason's mouth, checking for breath. Of course, he found none.

He looked at us in dismay. He did a double take when he noticed Crest crouched nearby, his massive white ears spread around him.

I could almost feel the Mist swirling around Tristan McLean as he attempted to decipher what he was seeing, trying to put it into a context his mortal brain could understand.

"Surfing accident?" he ventured. "Oh, Piper, you *know* those rocks are

dangerous. Why didn't you *tell* me—? How did—? Never mind. Never mind." With shaking hands, he dug his phone from the pocket of his pajama pants and dialed 9-1-1.

The phone squealed and hissed.

"My phone isn't—I—I don't understand."

Piper broke down in sobs, pressing herself to her father's chest.

At that moment, Tristan McLean should have broken once and for all. His life had fallen apart. He'd lost everything he'd worked for his entire career. Now, finding his daughter injured and her former boyfriend dead on the beach of his foreclosed property—surely, that was enough to make anyone's sanity crumble. Caligula would have another reason to celebrate a good night of sadistic work.

Instead, human resilience surprised me once again. Tristan McLean's expression turned steely. His focus cleared. He must have realized his daughter needed him and he couldn't afford to indulge in self-pity. He had one important role left to play: the role of her father.

"Okay, baby," he said, cradling her head. "Okay, we'll—we'll figure this out. We'll get through it."

He turned and pointed at Crest, still lurking near the cliff. "You."

Crest hissed at him like a cat.

Mr. McLean blinked, his mind doing a hard reset.

He pointed at me. "You. Take the others up to the house. I'm going to stay with Piper. Use the landline in the kitchen. Call nine-one-one. Tell them…" He looked at Jason's broken body. "Tell them to get here right away."

Piper looked up, her eyes swollen and red. "And, Apollo? Don't come back. You hear me? Just—just go."

"Pipes," her father said. "It's not their—"

"GO!" she screamed.

As we made our way up the rickety stairs, I wasn't sure which felt heavier: my exhausted body, or the cannonball of grief and guilt that had settled in my chest. All the way to the house, I heard Piper's sobs echoing off the dark cliffs.

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35

If you give a pan-
dos a ukulele, he
Will want lessons. DON'T.

THE news simply went from bad to worse.

Neither Meg nor I could make the landline function. Whatever curse afflicted demigod use of communications, it prevented us from getting a dial tone.

In desperation, I asked Crest to try. For him, the phone worked fine. I took that as a personal affront.

I told him to dial 9-1-1. After he failed repeatedly, it dawned on me that he was trying to punch in IX-I-I. I showed him how to do it correctly.

"Yes," he said to the operator. "There is a dead human on the beach. He requires help….The address?"

"Twelve Oro del Mar," I said.

Crest repeated this. "That is correct….Who am I?" He hissed and hung up.

That seemed like our cue to leave.

Misery upon misery: Gleeson Hedge's 1979 Ford Pinto was still parked in front of the McLean house. Lacking a better option, I was forced to drive it back to Palm Springs. I still felt terrible, but the magic sealant Medea had used on my chest seemed to be mending me, slowly and painfully, like an army of little demons with staple guns running around in my rib cage.

Meg rode shotgun, filling the car with a smell like smoky sweat, damp clothes, and burning apples. Crest sat in the backseat with my combat ukulele, picking and strumming, though I had yet to teach him any chords. As I'd anticipated, the fret board was much too small for his eight-fingered hand. Every time he played a bad combination of notes (which was every time he played) he hissed at the instrument, as if he might be able to intimidate it into cooperating.

I drove in a daze. The farther we got from Malibu, the more I found myself thinking, *No. Surely that didn't happen. Today must have been a bad dream. I did not just watch Jason Grace die. I did not just leave Piper McLean sobbing on that beach. I would never allow something like that to happen. I'm a good person!*

I did not believe myself.

Rather, I was the sort of person who deserved to be driving a yellow Pinto in the middle of the night with a grumpy, raggedy girl and a hissing, ukulele-obsessed pandos for company.

I wasn't even sure why we were returning to Palm Springs. What good would it do? Yes, Grover and our other friends were expecting us, but all we had to offer them was tragic news and an old pair of sandals. Our goal was in downtown Los Angeles: the entrance to the Burning Maze. To make sure Jason's death was not in vain, we should have been driving straight there to find the Sibyl and free her from her prison.

Ah, but who was I kidding? I was in no shape to do anything. Meg wasn't much better off. The best I could hope for was to make it to Palm Springs without dozing at the wheel. Then I could curl up at the bottom of the Cistern and cry myself to sleep.

Meg propped her feet on the dashboard. Her glasses had snapped in half, but she continued to wear them like skewed aviator goggles.

"Give her time," she told me. "She's angry."

For a moment, I wondered if Meg was speaking of herself in the third person. That's all I needed. Then I realized she meant Piper McLean. In her own way, Meg was trying to comfort me. The terrifying marvels of the day would never cease.

"I know," I said.

"You tried to kill yourself," she noted.

"I—I thought it would…distract Medea. It was a mistake. It's all my fault."

"Nah. I get it."

Was Meg McCaffrey forgiving me? I swallowed back a sob.

"Jason made a choice," she said. "Same as you. Heroes have to be ready to sacrifice themselves."

I felt unsettled…and not just because Meg had used such a long sentence. I didn't like her definition of heroism. I'd always thought of a hero as someone who stood on a parade float, waved at the crowd, tossed candy, and basked in the adulation of the commoners. But sacrificing yourself? No. That would *not* be one of my bullet points for a hero-recruitment brochure.

Also, Meg seemed to be calling *me* a hero, putting me in the same category as Jason Grace. That didn't feel right. I made a much better god than

a hero. What I'd told Piper was true about the finality of death. Jason would not be coming back. If I perished here on earth, I would not be getting a do-over either. I could never face that idea as calmly as Jason had. I had stabbed myself in the chest fully expecting that Medea would heal me, if only so she could flay me alive a few minutes later. I was a coward that way.

Meg picked at a callus on her palm. "You were right. About Caligula. Nero. Why I was so angry."

I glanced over. Her face was taut with concentration. She'd said the emperors' names with a strange detachment, as if she were examining deadly virus samples on the other side of a glass wall.

"And how do you feel now?" I asked.

Meg shrugged. "The same. Different. I don't know. When you cut the roots off a plant? That's how I feel. It's hard."

Meg's jumbled comments made sense to me, which wasn't a good sign for my sanity. I thought about Delos, the island of my birth, which had floated on the sea without roots until my mother, Leto, settled on it to give birth to my sister and me.

It was difficult for me to imagine the world before I was born, to imagine Delos as a place adrift. My home had literally grown roots because of my existence. I had never been unsure of who I was, or who my parents were, or where I was from.

Meg's Delos had never stopped drifting. Could I blame her for being angry?

"Your family is ancient," I noted. "The line of Plemnaeus gives you a proud heritage. Your father was doing important work at Aeithales. The blood-born, the silver wives…whatever those seeds are that you planted, they terrified Caligula."

Meg had so many new cuts on her face it was difficult to tell whether or not she was frowning. "And if I can't get those seeds to grow?"

I didn't hazard an answer. I could not handle any more thoughts of failure tonight.

Crest poked his head between the seats. "Can you show me the C minor six tri-chord now?"

Our reunion in Palm Springs was not a happy one.

Just from our condition, the dryads on duty could tell we brought bad news. It was two in the morning, but they gathered the entire population of the greenhouses in the Cistern, along with Grover, Coach Hedge, Mellie, and Baby Chuck.

When Joshua Tree saw Crest, the dryad scowled. "Why have you brought this creature into our midst?"

“More importantly,” Grover said, “where are Piper and Jason?”

He met my gaze, and his composure collapsed like a tower of cards. “Oh, no. No.”

We told them our story. Or rather, I did. Meg sat at the edge of the pond and stared desolately into the water. Crest crawled into one of the niches and wrapped his ears around himself like a blanket, cradling my ukulele the same way Mellie cradled Baby Chuck.

My voice broke several times as I described Jason’s final battle. His death finally became real to me. I gave up any hope that I would wake from this nightmare.

I expected Gleeson Hedge to explode, to start swinging his bat at everything and everyone. But like Tristan McLean, he surprised me. The satyr became still and calm, his voice unnervingly even.

“I was the kid’s protector,” he said. “I should’ve been there.”

Grover tried to console him, but Hedge raised a hand. “Don’t. Just don’t.” He faced Mellie. “Piper’s gonna need us.”

The cloud nymph brushed away a tear. “Yes. Of course.”

Aloe Vera wrung her hands. “Should I go, too? Maybe there’s something I can do.” She looked at me suspiciously. “Did you *try* aloe vera on this Grace boy?”

“I fear he is truly dead,” I said, “beyond even the powers of aloe.”

She looked unconvinced, but Mellie squeezed her shoulder. “You’re needed here, Aloe. Heal Apollo and Meg. Gleeson, get the diaper bag. I’ll meet you at the car.”

With Baby Chuck in her arms, she floated up and out of the Cistern.

Hedge snapped his fingers at me. “Pinto keys.”

I tossed them. “Please don’t do anything rash. Caligula is…You can’t—”

Hedge stopped me with a cold stare. “I’ve got Piper to take care of. That’s my priority. I’ll leave the rash stuff to other people.”

I heard the bitter accusation in his voice. Coming from Coach Hedge, that seemed deeply unfair, but I didn’t have the heart to protest.

Once the Hedge family was gone, Aloe Vera fussed over Meg and me, smearing goo on our injuries. She tutted at the red plug in my chest and replaced it with a lovely green spike from her hair.

The other dryads seemed at a loss for what to do or say. They stood around the pond, waiting and thinking. I supposed, as plants, they were comfortable with long silences.

Grover Underwood sat down heavily next to Meg. He moved his fingers over the holes of his reed pipes.

“Losing a demigod…” He shook his head. “That’s the worst thing that can happen to a protector. Years ago, when I thought I’d lost Thalia Grace…” He stopped himself, then slumped under the weight of despair. “Oh, Thalia.

When she hears about this…”

I didn’t think I could feel any worse, but this idea sent a few more razor blades circulating through my chest. Thalia Grace had saved my life in Indianapolis. Her fury in combat had been rivaled only by the tenderness with which she spoke of her brother. I felt that *I* should be the one to break the news to her. On the other hand, I did not want to be in the same state when she heard it.

I looked around at my dejected comrades. I remembered the Sibyl’s words in my dream: *It won’t seem worth it to you. I’m not sure it is myself. But you must come. You must hold them together in their grief.* Now I understood. I wished I didn’t. How could I hold together a whole Cistern full of prickly dryads when I couldn’t even hold *myself* together?

Nevertheless, I lifted the ancient pair of caligae we’d retrieved from the yachts. “At least we have these. Jason gave his life for us to have a chance at stopping Caligula’s plans. Tomorrow, I’ll wear these into the Burning Maze. I’ll find a way to free the Oracle and stop the fires of Helios.”

I thought that was a pretty good pep talk—designed to restore confidence and reassure my friends. I left out the part about not having a clue how to accomplish any of it.

Prickly Pear bristled, which she did with consummate skill. “You’re in no shape to do anything. Besides, Caligula will know what you’re planning. He’ll be waiting and ready this time.”

“She’s right,” Crest said from his niche.

The dryads frowned at him.

“Why is he even here?” Cholla demanded.

“Music lessons,” I said.

That earned me several dozen confused looks.

“Long story,” I said. “But Crest risked his life for us on the yachts. He saved Meg. We can trust him.” I looked at the young pandos and hoped my assessment was correct. “Crest, is there anything you can tell us that might help?”

Crest wrinkled his fuzzy white nose (which did not at all make him look cute or make me want to cuddle him). “You cannot use the main entrance downtown. They will be waiting.”

“We got past *you*,” Meg said.

Crest’s giant ears turned pink around the edges. “That was different,” he muttered. “My uncle was punishing me. It was the lunch shift. *No one* ever attacks during the lunch shift.”

He glared at me like I should’ve known this. “They will have more fighters now. And traps. The horse might even be there. He can move very fast. Just one phone call and he can arrive.”

I remembered how quickly Incitatus had shown up at Macro's Military Madness, and how viciously he'd fought aboard the shoe ship. I was not anxious to face him again.

"Is there another way in?" I asked. "Something, I don't know, less dangerous and conveniently close to the Oracle's room?"

Crest hugged his ukulele (*my* ukulele) tighter. "There is one. I know it. Others don't."

Grover tilted his head. "I have to say, that sounds a little *too* convenient."

Crest made a sour face. "I like exploring. Nobody else does. Uncle Amax—he always said I was a daydreamer. But when you explore, you find things."

I couldn't argue with that. When I explored, I tended to find dangerous things that wanted to kill me. I doubted tomorrow would be any different.

"Could you lead us to this secret entrance?" I asked.

Crest nodded. "Then you will have a chance. You can sneak in, get to the Oracle before the guards find you. Then you can come out and give me music lessons."

The dryads stared at me, their expressions unhelpfully blank, as if thinking *Hey, we can't tell you how to die. That's your choice.*

"We'll do it," Meg decided for me. "Grover, you in?"

Grover sighed. "Of course. But first, you two need sleep."

"And healing," Aloe added.

"And enchiladas?" I requested. "For breakfast?"

On that point, we reached consensus.

So, having enchiladas to look forward to—and also a likely fatal trip through the Burning Maze—I curled up in my sleeping bag and passed out.

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A suspended fourth
The kind of chord you play just
Before suddenly—

I woke covered in goo and with aloe spikes (yet again) in my nostrils.

On the bright side, my ribs no longer felt like they were filled with lava. My chest had healed, leaving only a puckered scar where I'd impaled myself. I'd never had a scar before. I wished I could see it as a badge of honor. Instead, I feared that now, whenever I looked down, I would remember the worst night of my life.

At least I had slept deeply with no dreams. That aloe vera was good stuff.

The sun blazed directly above. The Cistern was empty except for me and Crest, who snored in his niche, clutching his ukulele teddy bear. Someone, probably hours ago, had left a breakfast enchilada plate with a Big Hombre soda next to my sleeping bag. The food had cooled to lukewarm. The ice in the soda had melted. I didn't care. I ate and drank ravenously. I was grateful for the hot salsa that cleared the smell of burning yachts out of my sinuses.

Once I de-slimed myself and washed in the pond, I dressed in a fresh set of Macro's camouflage—arctic white, because there was such a demand for that in the Mojave Desert.

I shouldered my quiver and bow. I tied Caligula's shoes to my belt. I considered trying to take the ukulele from Crest but decided to let him keep it for now, since I did not want to get my hands bitten off.

Finally, I climbed into the oppressive Palm Springs heat.

Judging from the angle of the sun, it must have been about three in the afternoon. I wondered why Meg had let me sleep so late. I scanned the hillside and saw no one. For a guilty moment, I imagined that Meg and Grover had been unable to wake me and had gone by themselves to take care of the maze.

Darn it! I could say when they returned. *Sorry, guys! And I was all ready too!*

But no. Caligula's sandals dangled from my belt. They wouldn't have left without those. I also doubted they'd have forgotten Crest, since he was the only one who knew the supersecret entrance to the maze.

I caught a flicker of movement—two shadows moving behind the nearest greenhouse. I approached and heard voices in earnest conversation: Meg and Joshua.

I wasn't sure whether to let them be or to march over and shout *Meg, this is no time to flirt with your yucca boyfriend!*

Then I realized they were talking about climates and growing seasons. Ugh. I stepped into view and found them studying a line of seven young saplings that had sprouted from the rocky soil…in the exact spots where Meg had planted her seeds only yesterday.

Joshua spied me immediately, a sure sign that my arctic camouflage was working.

"Well. He's alive." He didn't sound particularly thrilled about this. "We were just discussing the new arrivals."

Each sapling rose about three feet high, its branches white, its leaves pale-green diamonds that looked much too delicate for the desert heat.

"Those are ash trees," I said, dumbfounded.

I knew a lot about ash trees….Well, more than I knew about most trees, anyway. Long ago, I had been called Apollo Meliai, Apollo of the Ash Trees, because of a sacred grove I owned in…oh, where was it? Back then I had so many vacation properties I couldn't keep them all straight.

My mind began to whirl. The word *meliai* meant something besides just *ash trees*. It had special significance. Despite being planted in a completely hostile climate, these young plants radiated strength and energy even I could sense. They'd grown overnight into healthy saplings. I wondered what they might look like tomorrow.

*Meliai…*I turned the word over in my mind. What had Caligula said? *Blood-born. Silver wives.*

Meg frowned. She looked much better this morning—back in her stoplight-colored clothes that had been miraculously patched and laundered. (I suspected the dryads, who are great with fabrics.) Her cat-eye glasses had been repaired with blue electrical tape. The scars on her arms and face had faded into faint white streaks like meteor trails across the sky.

"I still don't get it," she said. "Ash trees don't grow in the desert. Why was my dad experimenting with ash?"

"The Meliai," I said.

Joshua's eyes glittered. "That was my thought, too."

“The who?” Meg asked.

“I believe,” I said, “that your father was doing more than simply researching a new, hardy plant strain. He was trying to re-create…or rather *reincarnate* an ancient species of dryad.”

Was it my imagination, or did the young trees rustle? I restrained the urge to step back and run away. They were only saplings, I reminded myself. Nice, harmless baby plants that did not have any intention of murdering me.

Joshua knelt. In his khaki safari clothes, with his tousled gray-green hair, he looked like a wild-animal expert who was about to point out some deadly species of scorpion for the TV audience. Instead he touched the branches of the nearest sapling, then quickly removed his hand.

“Could it be?” he mused. “They’re not conscious yet, but the power I sense…”

Meg crossed her arms and pouted. “Well, I wouldn’t have planted them here if I’d known they were important ash trees or whatever. Nobody *told* me.”

Joshua gave her a dry smile. “Meg McCaffrey, if these *are* the Meliai, they will survive even in this harsh climate. They were the very first dryads—seven sisters born when the blood of murdered Ouranos fell upon the soil of Gaea. They were created at the same time as the Furies, and with the same great strength.”

I shuddered. I did not like the Furies. They were ugly, ill-tempered, and had bad taste in music. “The blood-born,” I said. “That’s what Caligula called them. And the *silver wives*.”

“Mmm.” Joshua nodded. “According to legend, the Meliai married humans who lived during the Silver Age, and gave birth to the race of the Bronze Age. But we all make mistakes.”

I studied the saplings. They didn’t look much like the mothers of Bronze Age humanity. They didn’t look like the Furies, either.

“Even for a skilled botanist like Dr. McCaffrey,” I said, “even with the blessing of Demeter…is reincarnating such powerful beings *possible*?”

Joshua swayed pensively. “Who can say? It seems the family of Plemnaeus was pursuing this goal for millennia. No one would be better suited. Dr. McCaffrey perfected the seeds. His daughter planted them.”

Meg blushed. “I don’t know. Whatever. Seems weird.”

Joshua regarded the young ash trees. “We will have to wait and see. But imagine seven primordial dryads, beings of great power, bent on the preservation of nature and the destruction of any who would threaten it.” His expression turned unusually warlike for a flowering plant. “Surely Caligula would see that as a major threat.”

I couldn’t argue. Enough of a threat to burn down a botanist’s house and send him and his daughter straight into the arms of Nero? Probably.

Joshua rose. “Well, I must go dormant. Even for me, the daylight hours are taxing. We will keep an eye on our seven new friends. Good luck on your quest!”

He burst into a cloud of yucca fiber.

Meg looked disgruntled, probably because I had interrupted their flirty talk about climate zones.

“Ash trees,” she grumbled. “And I planted them in the desert.”

“You planted them where they needed to be,” I said. “If these truly are the Meliai”—I shook my head in amazement—“they responded to *you*, Meg. You brought back a life force that has been absent for millennia. That is awe-inspiring.”

She looked over. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” I assured her. “You are your mother’s child, Meg McCaffrey. You are quite impressive.”

“Hmph.”

I understood her skepticism.

Demeter was rarely described as *impressive*. Too often, the goddess got ridiculed for not being interesting or powerful enough. Like plants, Demeter worked slowly and quietly. Her designs grew over the course of centuries. But when those designs came to fruition (bad fruit pun, sorry), they could be extraordinary. Like Meg McCaffrey.

“Go wake up Crest,” Meg told me. “I’ll meet you down at the road. Grover’s getting us a car.”

Grover was almost as good as Piper McLean at procuring luxury vehicles. He had found us a red Mercedes XLS, which I normally would not have complained about—except it was the exact same make and model that Meg and I had driven from Indianapolis to the Cave of Trophonius.

I’d like to tell you I didn’t believe in bad omens. But since I was the god of omens…

At least Grover agreed to drive. The winds had shifted south, filling the Morongo Valley with wildfire smoke and clogging traffic even more than usual. The afternoon sun filtered through the red sky like a baleful eye.

I feared the sun might look that hostile for the rest of eternity if Caligula became the new solar god…but no, I couldn’t think like that.

If Caligula came into possession of the sun chariot, there was no telling what horrible things he would do to trick out his new ride: sequencers, under-carriage lighting, a horn that played the riff from “Low Rider”…Some things could not be tolerated.

I sat in the backseat with Crest and did my best to teach him basic ukulele chords. He was a quick learner, despite the size of his hands, but he grew

impatient with the major chords and wanted to learn more exotic combinations.

"Show me the suspended fourth again," he said. "I like that."

Of course he would like the most unresolved chords.

"We should buy you a large guitar," I urged once more. "Or even a lute."

"You play ukulele," he said. "I will play ukulele."

Why did I always attract such stubborn companions? Was it my winning, easygoing personality? I didn't know.

When Crest concentrated, his expression reminded me strangely of Meg's—such a young face, yet so intent and serious, as if the fate of the world depended on this chord being played correctly, this packet of seeds being planted, this bag of rotten produce being thrown into the face of this particular street thug.

Why that similarity should make me fond of Crest, I wasn't sure, but it struck me how much he had lost since yesterday—his job, his uncle, almost his life—and how much he had risked coming with us.

"I never said how sorry I was," I ventured, "about your Uncle Amax."

Crest sniffed the ukulele fret board. "Why would you be sorry? Why would I?"

"Uh…It's just, you know, an expression of courtesy…when you kill someone's relatives."

"I never liked him," Crest said. "My mother sent me to him, said he would make me a *real* pandos warrior." He strummed his chord but got a diminished seventh by mistake. He looked pleased with himself. "I do not want to be a warrior. What is your job?"

"Er, well, I'm the god of music."

"Then that is what I shall be. A god of music."

Meg glanced back and smirked.

I tried to give Crest an encouraging smile, but I hoped he would not ask to flay me alive and consume my essence. I already had a waiting list for that. "Well, let's master these chords first, shall we?"

We traced our way north of LA, through San Bernardino, then Pasadena. I found myself gazing up at the hills where we'd visited the Edgarton School. I wondered what the faculty would do when they found Jason Grace missing, and when they discovered that their school van had been commandeered and abandoned at the Santa Barbara waterfront. I thought of Jason's diorama of Temple Hill on his desk, the sketchbooks that waited on his shelf. It seemed unlikely I would live long enough to keep my promise to him, to bring his plans safely to the two camps. The thought of failing him yet again hurt my heart even worse than Crest's attempt at a G-flat minor 6.

Finally Crest directed us south on Interstate 5, toward the city. We took the Crystal Springs Drive exit and plunged into Griffith Park with its winding

roads, rolling golf courses, and thick groves of eucalyptus.

"Farther," Crest said. "The second right. Up that hill."

He guided us onto a gravel service road not designed for a Mercedes XLS.

"It's up there." Crest pointed into the woods. "We must walk."

Grover pulled over next to a stand of yuccas, who for all I knew were friends of his. He checked out the trailhead, where a small sign read OLD LOS ANGELES ZOO.

"I know this place." Grover's goatee quivered. "I hate this place. Why would you bring us here?"

"Told you," Crest said. "Maze entrance."

"But…" Grover gulped, no doubt weighing his natural aversion to places that caged animals against his desire to destroy the Burning Maze. "All right."

Meg seemed happy enough, all things considered. She breathed in the what-passed-in-LA-for-fresh air and even did a few tentative cartwheels as we made our way up the trail.

We climbed to the top of the ridge. Below us spread the ruins of a zoo—overgrown sidewalks, crumbling cement walls, rusty cages, and man-made caves filled with debris.

Grover hugged himself, shivering despite the heat. "The humans abandoned this place decades ago when they built their new zoo. I can still feel the emotions of the animals that were kept here—their sadness. It's horrible."

"Down here!" Crest spread his ears and sailed over the ruins, landing in a deep grotto.

Not having flight-worthy ears, the rest of us had to pick and climb our way through the tangled terrain. At last we joined Crest at the bottom of a grimy cement bowl covered with dried leaves and litter.

"A bear pit?" Grover turned pale. "Ugh. Poor bears."

Crest pressed his eight-fingered hands against the back wall of the enclosure. He scowled. "This is not right. It should be here."

My spirits sank to a new low. "You mean your secret entrance is gone?"

Crest hissed in frustration. "I should not have mentioned this place to Screamer. Amax must have heard us talking. He sealed it somehow."

I was tempted to point out that it was *never* a good idea to share your secrets with someone named Screamer, but Crest looked like he felt bad enough already.

"What now?" Meg asked. "Use the downtown exit?"

"Too dangerous," Crest said. "There *must* be a way to open this!"

Grover was so twitchy I wondered if he had a squirrel in his pants. He looked like he wanted very much to give up and run from this zoo as fast as possible. Instead, he sighed. "What did the prophecy say about your cloven guide?"

“That you alone knew the way,” I recalled. “But you already served that purpose getting us to Palm Springs.”

Reluctantly, Grover pulled out his pipes. “I guess I’m not done yet.”

“A song of opening?” I asked. “Like Hedge used in Macro’s store?”

Grover nodded. “I haven’t tried this in a while. Last time, I opened a path from Central Park into the Underworld.”

“Just get us into the maze, please,” I advised. “Not the Underworld.”

He raised his pipes and trilled Rush’s “Tom Sawyer.” Crest looked entranced. Meg covered her ears.

The cement wall shook. It cracked down the middle, revealing a steep set of rough-hewn stairs leading down into the dark.

“Perfect,” Grover grumbled. “I hate the underground almost as much as I hate zoos.”

Meg summoned her blades. She marched inside. After a deep breath, Grover followed.

I turned to Crest. “Are you coming with us?”

He shook his head. “I told you. I’m no fighter. I will watch the exit and practice my chords.”

“But I might need the uku—”

“I will practice my chords,” he insisted, and began strumming a suspended fourth.

I followed my friends into the dark, that chord still playing behind me—exactly the sort of tense background music one might expect just before a dramatic, bloodcurdling fight.

Sometimes I really hated suspended fourths.

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Want to play a game?
It's easy. You take a guess.
Then you burn to death.

THIS part of the maze had no elevators, wandering government employees, or signs reminding us to honk before turning corners.

We reached the bottom of the stairs and found a vertical shaft in the floor. Grover, being part goat, had no difficulty climbing down. After he called up that no monsters or fallen bears were waiting for us, Meg grew a thick swath of wisteria down the side of the pit, which allowed us some handholds and also smelled lovely.

We dropped into a small square chamber with four tunnels radiating outward, one from each wall. The air was hot and dry as if the fires of Helios had recently swept through. Sweat beaded on my skin. In my quiver, arrow shafts creaked and fletching hissed.

Grover peered forlornly at the tiny bit of sunlight seeping down from above.

"We'll get back to the upper world," I promised him.

"I was just wondering if Piper got my message."

Meg looked at him over her blue-taped glasses. "What message?"

"I ran into a cloud nymph when I was picking up the Mercedes," he said, as if running into cloud nymphs often happened when he was borrowing automobiles. "I asked her to take a message to Mellie, tell her what we were up to—assuming, you know, the nymph makes it there safely."

I considered this, wondering why Grover hadn't mentioned it earlier. "Were you hoping Piper might meet us here?"

"Not really…" His expression said *Yes, please, gods, we could use the help.* "I just thought she should know what we were doing in case…" His expression said *in case we combust into flames and are never heard from*

again.

I disliked Grover's expressions.

"Time for the shoes," Meg said.

I realized she was looking at me. "What?"

"The shoes." She pointed at the sandals hanging from my belt.

"Oh, right." I tugged them from my belt. "I don't suppose, er, either of you want to try them on?"

"Nuh-uh," said Meg.

Grover shuddered. "I've had bad experiences with enchanted footwear."

I was not excited to wear an evil emperor's sandals. I feared they might turn me into a power-hungry maniac. Also, they didn't go with my arctic camouflage. Nevertheless, I sat on the floor and laced up the caligae. It made me appreciate just how much more of the world the Roman Empire might have conquered if they'd had access to Velcro straps.

I stood up and tried a few steps. The sandals dug into my ankles and pinched at the sides. In the plus column, I felt no more sociopathic than usual. Hopefully I had not been infected with Caligulitis.

"Okay," I said. "Shoes, lead us to the Erythraean Sibyl!"

The shoes did nothing. I thrust a toe in one direction, then another, wondering if they needed a kick start. I checked the soles for buttons or battery compartments. Nothing.

"What do we do now?" I asked no one in particular.

The chamber brightened with a faint gold light, as if someone had turned up a dimmer switch.

"Guys." Grover pointed at our feet. On the rough cement floor, the faint gold outline of a five-foot square had appeared. If it had been a trapdoor, we would've all dropped straight through. Identical connected squares branched off down each of the corridors like the spaces of a board game. The trails were not of equal length. One extended only three spaces into the hallway. Another was five spaces long. Another was seven. Another six.

Against the chamber wall on my right, a glowing golden inscription appeared in ancient Greek: *Python-slayer, golden-lyred, armed with arrows of dread.*

"What's going on?" Meg asked. "What's that say?"

"You can't read ancient Greek?" I asked.

"And you can't tell a strawberry from a yam," she retorted. "What's it say?"

I gave her the translation.

Grover stroked his goatee. "That sounds like Apollo. I mean, you. When you used to be…good."

I swallowed my hurt feelings. "Of course it's Apollo. I mean, me."

"So, is the maze, like…welcoming you?" Meg asked.

That would have been nice. I'd always wanted a voice-activated virtual assistant for my palace on Olympus, but Hephaestus hadn't been able to get the technology quite right. The one time he tried, the assistant had been named Alexasiriastrophona. She'd been very picky about having her name pronounced perfectly, and at the same time had an annoying habit of getting my requests wrong. I'd say, *Alexasiriastrophona, send a plague arrow to destroy Corinth, please.* And she would reply, *I think you said:* Men blame rows of soy and corn fleas.

Here in the Burning Maze, I doubted a virtual assistant had been installed. If it had been, it would probably only ask at which temperature I preferred to be cooked.

"This is a word puzzle," I decided. "Like an acrostic or a crossword. The Sibyl is trying to guide us to her."

Meg frowned at the different hallways. "If she's trying to help, why can't she just make it easy and give us a single direction?"

"This is how Herophile operates," I said. "It's the only way she *can* help us. I believe we have to, er, fill in the correct answer in the correct number of spaces."

Grover scratched his head. "Does anyone have a giant golden pen? I wish Percy were here."

"I don't think we need that," I said. "We just need to walk in the right direction to spell out my name. *Apollo,* six letters. Only one of these corridors has six spaces."

"Are you counting the space we're standing in?" Meg asked.

"Uh, no," I said. "Let's assume this is the *start* space." Her question made me doubt myself, though.

"What if the answer is *Lester*?" she said. "That has six spaces, too."

The idea made my throat itch. "Will you please stop asking good questions? I had this all figured out!"

"Or what if the answer is in Greek?" Grover added. "The question is in Greek. How many spaces would your name be then?"

Another annoyingly logical point. My name in Greek was Απολλων.

"That would be seven spaces," I admitted. "Even if transcribed in English, Apollon."

"Ask the Arrow of Dodona?" Grover suggested.

The scar in my chest tingled like a faulty electric outlet. "That's probably against the rules."

Meg snorted. "You just don't want to talk to the arrow. Why not try?"

If I resisted, I imagined she would phrase it as an order, so I pulled forth the Arrow of Dodona.

BACKETH OFF, KNAVE! it buzzed in alarm. *NE'ER AGAIN SHALT*

THOU STICKEST ME IN THY LOATHSOME CHEST! NOR IN THE EYES OF THY ENEMIES!

"Relax," I told it. "I just want some advice."

SO THOU SAYEST NOW, BUT I WARN THEE— The arrow went deathly still. *BUT SOOTH. IS THIS A CROSSWORD I SEE BEFORE ME? VERILY, I DOTH LOVE CROSSWORDS.*

"Oh, joy. Oh, happiness." I turned to my friends. "The arrow loves crosswords."

I explained our predicament to the arrow, who insisted on getting a closer look at the floor squares and the hint written on the wall. A closer look…with what eyes? I did not know.

The arrow hummed thoughtfully. *METHINKS THE ANSWER SHALT BEEST IN THE COMMON TONGUE OF ENGLISH. 'TWOULD BEEST THE NAME BY WHICH THOU ART MOST FAMILIAR IN THE PRESENT DAY.*

"He sayeth—" I sighed. "He says the answer will be in English. I hope he means modern English and not the strange Shakespearean lingo he speaks—"

'TIS NOT STRANGE! the arrow objected.

"Because we don't have enough spaces to spell *Apollonius beest thy answereth*."

OH, HA-HA. A JEST AS WEAK AS THY MUSCLES.

"Thanks for playing." I sheathed the arrow. "So, friends, the tunnel with six squares. *Apollo.* Shall we?"

"What if we choose wrong?" Grover asked.

"Well," I said, "perhaps the magic sandals will help. Or perhaps the sandals only allow us to play this game in the first place, and if we stray from the right path, despite the Sibyl's efforts to assist us, we will open ourselves up to the fury of the maze—"

"And we burn to death," Meg said.

"I love games," Grover said. "Lead on."

"The answer is *Apollo*!" I said, just for the record.

As soon as I stepped to the next square, a large capital *A* appeared at my feet.

I took this as a good sign. I stepped again, and a *P* appeared. My two friends followed close behind.

At last we stepped off the sixth square, into a small chamber identical to the last. Looking back, the entire word *APOLLO* blazed in our wake. Before us, three more corridors with golden rows of squares led onward—left, right, and forward.

"There's another clue." Meg pointed to the wall. "Why is this one in English?"

"I don't know," I said. Then I read aloud the glowing words: "'*Herald of*

new entrances, opener of the softly gliding year, Janus, of the double.’”

“Oh, that guy. Roman god of doorways.” Grover shuddered. “I met him once.” He looked around suspiciously. “I hope he doesn’t pop up. He would love this place.”

Meg traced her fingers across the golden lines. “Kinda easy, isn’t it? His name’s right there in the clue. Five letters, *J-A-N-U-S*, so it’s got to be that way.” She pointed down the hallway on the right, which was the only one with five spaces.

I stared at the clue, then the squares. I was beginning to sense something even more unsettling than the heat, but I wasn’t sure what it was.

“*Janus* isn’t the answer,” I decided. “This is more of a fill-in-the-blanks situation, don’t you think? *Janus of the double* what?”

“Faces,” Grover said. “He had two faces, neither of which I need to see again.”

I announced aloud to the empty corridor: “The correct answer is *faces*!”

I received no response, but as we proceeded down the right-hand corridor, the word *FACES* appeared. Reassuringly, we were not roasted alive by Titan fire.

In the next chamber, new corridors once again led in three directions. This time, the glowing clue on the wall was again in ancient Greek.

A thrill went through me as I read the lines. “I know this! It’s from a poem by Bacchylides.” I translated for my friends: “*But the highest god, mighty with his thunderbolt, sent Hypnos and his twin from snowy Olympus to the fearless fighter Sarpedon.”*

Meg and Grover stared at me blankly. Honestly, just because I was wearing the Caligula shoes, did I have to do *everything*?

“Something is altered in this line,” I said. “I remember the scene. Sarpedon dies. Zeus has his body carried away from the battlefield. But the wording—”

“Hypnos is the god of sleep,” Grover said. “That cabin makes *excellent* milk and cookies. But who’s his twin?”

My heart ka-thumped. “That’s what’s different. In the actual line, it doesn’t say *his twin*. It names the twin: Thanatos. Or *Death*, in English.”

I looked at the three tunnels. No corridor had eight squares for Thanatos. One had ten spaces, one had four, and one had five—just enough to fit DEATH.

“Oh, no…” I leaned against the nearest wall. I felt like one of Aloe Vera’s spikes was making its slimy way down my back.

“Why do you look so scared?” Meg asked. “You’re doing great so far.”

“Because, Meg,” I said, “we are not just solving random puzzles. We are putting together a word-puzzle prophecy. And so far, it says *APOLLO FACES*

DEATH.”

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I sing to myself!
Though Apollo is cooler
Like, way, way cooler

I hated being right.

When we got to the end of the tunnel, the word *DEATH* blazed on the floor behind us. We found ourselves in a larger circular chamber, five new tunnels branching out before us like the fingers and thumb of a giant automaton hand.

I waited for a new clue to appear on the wall. Whatever it was, I desperately wanted the answer to be *NOT REALLY.* Or perhaps *AND DEFEATS IT EASILY!*

"Why is nothing happening?" Grover asked.

Meg tilted her head. "Listen."

Blood roared in my ears, but at last I heard what Meg was talking about: a distant cry of pain—deep and guttural, more beast than human—along with the dull crackle of fire, as if…oh, gods. As if someone or something had been grazed by Titan heat and now lay dying a slow death.

"Sounds like a monster," Grover decided. "Should we help it?"

"How?" Meg asked.

She had a point. The noise echoed, so diffuse I couldn't tell which corridor it came from, even if we were free to pick our path without answering riddles.

"We'll have to keep going," I decided. "I imagine Medea has monsters on guard down here. That must be one of them. I doubt she's too concerned about them occasionally getting caught in the fires."

Grover winced. "Doesn't seem right, letting it suffer."

"Also," Meg added, "what if one of those monsters triggers a flash fire and it comes our way?"

I stared at my young master. “You are a fountain of dark questions today. We have to have faith.”

“In the Sibyl?” she asked. “In those evil shoes?”

I didn’t have an answer for her. Fortunately, I was saved by the belated appearance of the next clue—three golden lines in Latin.

“Oh, Latin!” Grover said. “Hold on. I can do this.” He squinted at the words, then sighed. “No. I can’t.”

“Honestly, no Greek or Latin?” I said. “What do they teach you in satyr school?”

“Mostly, you know, important stuff. Like plants.”

“*Thank* you,” Meg muttered.

I translated the clue for my less educated friends:

“*Now must I tell of the flight of the king.*
The last to reign over the Roman people
Was a man unjust yet puissant in arms.”

I nodded. “I believe that’s a quote from Ovid.”

Neither of my comrades looked impressed.

“So what’s the answer?” Meg asked. “The last Roman emperor?”

“No, not an emperor,” I said. “In the very first days of Rome, the city was ruled by kings. The last one, the seventh, was overthrown, and Rome became a republic.”

I tried to cast my thoughts back to the Kingdom of Rome. That whole time period was a little hazy to me. We gods were still based in Greece then. Rome was something of a backwater. The last king, though…he brought back some bad memories.

Meg broke my reverie. “What is *puissant*?”

“It means powerful,” I said.

“Doesn’t sound like that. If somebody called me *puissant*, I would hit them.”

“But you are, in fact, *puissant* in arms.”

She hit me.

“Ow.”

“Guys,” Grover said. “What’s the name of the last Roman king?”

I thought. “Ta…hmm. I just had it, and now it’s gone. Ta-something.”

“Taco?” Grover said helpfully.

“Why would a Roman king be named Taco?”

“I don’t know.” Grover rubbed his stomach. “Because I’m hungry?”

Curse the satyr. Now all I could think of was tacos. Then the answer came back to me. “Tarquin! Or Tarquinius, in the original Latin.”

“Well, which is it?” Meg asked.

I studied the corridors. The tunnel on the far left, the thumb, had ten spaces, enough for *Tarquinius*. The tunnel in the middle had seven, enough for *Tarquin*.

“It’s that one,” I decided, pointing to the center tunnel.

“How can you be sure?” Grover asked. “Because the arrow told us the answers would be in English?”

“That,” I conceded, “and also because these tunnels look like five fingers. It makes sense the maze would give me the middle finger.” I raised my voice. “Isn’t that right? The answer is *Tarquin*, the middle finger? I love you, too, maze.”

We walked the path, the name *TARQUIN* blazing in gold behind us.

The corridor opened into a square chamber, the largest space we’d seen yet. The walls and floor were tiled in faded Roman mosaics that looked original, though I was fairly sure the Romans had never colonized any part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

The air felt even warmer and drier. The floor was hot enough that I could feel it through the soles of my sandals. One positive thing about the room: it offered us only three new tunnels to choose from, rather than five.

Grover sniffed the air. “I don’t like this room. I smell something… monstery.”

Meg gripped her scimitars. “From which direction?”

“Uh…all of them?”

“Oh, look,” I said, trying to sound cheerful, “another clue.”

We approached the nearest mosaic wall, where two golden lines of English glowed across the tiles:

Leaves, body-leaves, growing up above me, above death,

Perennial roots, tall leaves—O the winter shall not freeze you, delicate leaves

Perhaps my brain was still stuck in Latin and Greek, because those lines meant nothing to me, even in plain English.

“I like this one,” Meg said. “It’s about leaves.”

“Yes, lots of leaves,” I agreed. “But it’s nonsense.”

Grover choked. “*Nonsense?* Don’t you recognize it?”

“Er, should I?”

“You’re the god of *poetry*!”

I felt my face begin to burn. “I *used* to be the god of poetry, which does not mean I am a walking encyclopedia of every obscure line ever written—”

“Obscure?” Grover’s shrill voice echoed unnervingly down the corridors. “That’s Walt Whitman! From *Leaves of Grass*! I don’t remember exactly

which poem it's from, but—"

"You read poetry?" Meg asked.

Grover licked his lips. "You know…mostly nature poetry. Whitman, for a human, had some beautiful things to say about trees."

"And leaves," Meg noted. "And roots."

"Exactly."

I wanted to lecture them about how overrated Walt Whitman was. The man was always singing songs to himself instead of praising others, like *me*, for instance. But I decided the critique would have to wait.

"Do you know the answer, then?" I asked Grover. "Is this a fill-in-the-blanks question? Multiple choice? True-False?"

Grover studied the lines. "I think…yeah. There's a word missing at the beginning. It's supposed to read *Tomb-leaves, body-leaves,* et cetera."

"Tomb-leaves?" Meg asked. "That doesn't make sense. But neither does body-leaves. Unless he's talking about a dryad."

"It's imagery," I said. "Clearly, he is describing a place of death, overgrown by nature—"

"Oh, now you're an expert on Walt Whitman," Grover said.

"Satyr, don't test me. When I become a god again—"

"Both of you, stop," Meg ordered. "Apollo, say the answer."

"Fine." I sighed. "Maze, the answer is *tomb*."

We took another successful trip down the middle finger…I mean, central hall. The word *TOMB* blazed in the four squares behind us.

At the end, we arrived in a circular room, even larger and more ornate. Across the domed ceiling spread a silver-on-blue mosaic of zodiac signs. Six new tunnels radiated outward. In the middle of the floor stood an old fountain, unfortunately dry. (A drink would have been much appreciated. Interpreting poetry and solving puzzles is thirsty work.)

"The rooms are getting bigger," Grover noted. "And more elaborate."

"Maybe that's good," I said. "It might mean we're getting closer."

Meg eyed the zodiac images. "You sure we didn't take a wrong turn? The prophecy doesn't even make sense so far. *Apollo faces death Tarquin tomb*."

"You have to assume the small words," I said. "I believe the message is *Apollo faces death* in *Tarquin's tomb*." I gulped. "Actually, I don't like that message. Perhaps the little words we're missing are *Apollo faces* NO *death; Tarquin's tomb.*…something, something. Maybe the next words are *grants him fabulous prizes*."

"Uh-huh." Meg pointed at the rim of the central fountain, where the next clue had appeared. Three lines in English read:

Named for Apollo's fallen love, this flower should be planted in autumn.

Set the bulb in the soil with the pointy end up. Cover with soil

And water thoroughly…you are transplanting.

I stifled a sob.

First the maze forced me to read Walt Whitman. Now it taunted me with my own past. To mention my dead love, Hyacinthus, and his tragic death, to reduce him to a bit of Oracle trivia…No. This was too much.

I sat down on the rim of the fountain and cupped my face in my hands.

"What's wrong?" Grover asked nervously.

Meg answered. "Those lines are talking about his old boyfriend. Hyacinth."

"Hyacinthus," I corrected.

I surged to my feet, my sadness converting to anger. My friends edged away. I supposed I must have looked like a crazy man, and that's indeed how I felt.

"Herophile!" I yelled into the darkness. "I thought we were friends!"

"Uh, Apollo?" Meg said. "I don't think she's taunting you on purpose. Also, the answer is about the *flower*, hyacinth. I'm pretty sure those lines are from the Farmer's Almanac."

"I don't care if they're from the telephone directory!" I bellowed. "Enough is enough. *HYACINTH!*" I yelled into the corridors. "The answer is *HYACINTH*! Are you happy?"

Meg yelled, "NO!"

In retrospect, she really should have yelled *Apollo, stop!* Then I would've had no choice but to obey her command. Therefore, what happened next is Meg's fault.

I marched down the only corridor with eight squares.

Grover and Meg ran after me, but by the time they caught me it was too late.

I looked behind, expecting to see the word *HYACINTH* spelled out on the floor. Instead, only six of the squares were lit up in glaring correction-pen red:

U
N
L
E
S
S

Under our feet, the tunnel floor disappeared, and we dropped into a pit of fire.

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Noble sacrifice
I'll protect you from the flames
Wow, I'm a good guy

UNDER different circumstances, how delighted I would have been to see that *UNLESS*.

Apollo faces death in Tarquin's tomb unless…

Oh, happy conjunction! It meant there was a way to avoid potential death, and I was *all about* avoiding potential death.

Unfortunately, falling into a pit of fire dampened my newfound hope.

In midair, before I could even process what was happening, I lurched to a halt, my quiver strap yanked tight across my chest, my left foot nearly popping free from my ankle.

I found myself dangling next to the wall of the pit. About twenty feet below, the shaft opened into a lake of fire. Meg was clinging desperately to my foot. Above me, Grover held me by the quiver with one hand, his other gripping a tiny ledge of rock. He kicked off his shoes and tried to find purchase with his hooves on the wall.

"Well done, brave satyr!" I cried. "Pull us up!"

Grover's eyes bugged. His face dripped with sweat. He made a whimpering sound that seemed to indicate he didn't have the strength to pull all three of us out of the pit.

If I survived and became a god again, I would have to talk to the Council of Cloven Elders about adding more physical education classes to satyr school.

I clawed at the wall, hoping to find a convenient rail or emergency exit. There was nothing.

Below me, Meg yelled, "REALLY, Apollo? You water hyacinths thoroughly UNLESS you are transplanting them!"

“How was I supposed to know that?” I protested.

“You CREATED hyacinths!”

Ugh. Mortal logic. Just because a god creates something doesn’t mean he understands it. Otherwise, Prometheus would know everything about humans, and I assure you, he does not. I created hyacinths, so I’m supposed to know how to plant and water them?

“Help!” Grover squeaked.

His hooves shifted on the tiny crevices. His fingers trembled, his arms shaking as if he were holding the weight of two extra people, which…oh, actually, he was.

The heat from below made it difficult to think. If you’ve ever stood near a barbecue fire, or had your face too close to an open oven, you can imagine that feeling increased a hundredfold. My eyes dried up. My mouth became parched. A few more breaths of scalding air and I would probably lose consciousness.

The fires below seemed to be sweeping across a stone floor. The drop itself would not be fatal. If only there were a way to turn off the fires…

An idea came to me—a very bad idea, which I blamed on my boiling brain. Those flames were fueled by the essence of Helios. If some small bit of his consciousness remained…it was theoretically possible that I could communicate with him. Perhaps, if I touched the fires directly, I could convince him that we were not the enemy and he should let us live. I would probably have a luxurious three nanoseconds to accomplish this before dying in agony. Besides, if I fell, my friends might stand a chance of climbing out. After all, I was the heaviest person in our party, thanks to Zeus’s cruel curse of flab.

Terrible, terrible idea. I would never have had the courage to try it had I not thought of Jason Grace, and what he had done to save me.

“Meg,” I said, “can you attach yourself to the wall?”

“Do I look like Spider-Man?” she yelled back.

Very few people look as good in tights as Spider-Man. Meg was certainly not one of them.

“Use your swords!” I called.

Holding my ankle with just one hand, she summoned a scimitar. She stabbed at the wall—once, twice. The curve of the blade did not make her job easy. On the third strike, however, the point sank deep into the rock. She gripped the hilt and let go of my ankle, holding herself above the flames with only her sword. “What now?”

“Stay put!”

“I can do that!”

“Grover!” I yelled up. “You can drop me now, but don’t worry. I have a __”

Grover dropped me.

Honestly, what sort of protector just drops you into a fire when you tell him it's okay to drop you into a fire? I expected a long argument, during which I would assure him that I had a plan to save myself and them. I expected protests from Grover and Meg (well, maybe not from Meg) about how I shouldn't sacrifice myself for their sake, how I couldn't possibly survive the flames, and so on. But nope. He dumped me without a thought.

At least it gave me no time for second-guessing.

I couldn't torture myself with doubts like *What if this doesn't work? What if I cannot survive the solar fires that used to be second nature to me? What if this lovely prophecy we are piecing together, about me dying in the tomb of Tarquin, does NOT automatically mean that I will not die today, in this horrible Burning Maze?*

I don't remember hitting the floor.

My soul seemed to detach from my body. I found myself thousands of years back in time, on the very first morning I became the god of the sun.

Overnight, Helios had vanished. I didn't know what final prayer to me as the god of the sun had finally tipped the balance—banishing the old Titan to oblivion while promoting me to his spot—but here I was at the Palace of the Sun.

Terrified and nervous, I pushed open the doors of the throne room. The air burned. The light blinded me.

Helios's oversize golden throne stood empty, his cloak draped over the armrest. His helm, whip, and gilded shoes sat on the dais, ready for their master. But the Titan himself was simply gone.

I am a god, I told myself. *I can do this.*

I strode toward the throne, willing myself not to combust. If I ran out of the palace screaming with my toga on fire the very first day on the job, I would never hear the end of it.

Slowly, the fires receded before me. By force of will, I grew in size until I could comfortably wear the helm and cloak of my predecessor.

I didn't try out the throne, though. I had a job to do, and very little time.

I glanced at the whip. Some trainers say you should never show kindness with a new team of horses. They will see you as weak. But I decided to leave the whip. I would not start my new position as a harsh taskmaster.

I strode into the stable. The sun chariot's beauty brought tears to my eyes. The four sun horses stood already harnessed, their hooves polished gold, their manes rippling fire, their eyes molten ingots.

They regarded me warily. *Who are you?*

"I am Apollo," I said, forcing myself to sound confident. "We're going to have a great day!"

I leaped into the chariot, and off we went.

I'll admit it was a steep learning curve. About a forty-five-degree arc, to be precise. I may have done a few inadvertent loops in the sky. I may have caused a few new glaciers and deserts until I found the proper cruising altitude. But by the end of the day, the chariot was mine. The horses had shaped themselves to my will, *my* personality. I was Apollo, god of the sun.

I tried to hold on to that feeling of confidence, the elation of that successful first day.

I came back to my senses and found myself at the bottom of the pit, crouching in the flames.

"Helios," I said. "It's me."

The blaze swirled around me, trying to incinerate my flesh and dissolve my soul. I could feel the presence of the Titan—bitter, hazy, angry. His whip seemed to be lashing me a thousand times a second.

"I will not be burned," I said. "I am Apollo. I am your rightful heir."

The fires raged hotter. Helios resented me…but wait. That wasn't the full story. He hated *being here*. He hated this maze, this half-life prison.

"I will free you," I promised.

Noise crackled and hissed in my ears. Perhaps it was only the sound of my head catching fire, but I thought I heard a voice in the flames: *KILL. HER.*

Her…

Medea.

Helios's emotions burned their way into my mind. I felt his loathing for his sorceress granddaughter. All that Medea had told me earlier about holding back Helios's wrath—that might have been true. But above all, she was holding Helios back from killing *her*. She had chained him, bound his will to hers, wrapped herself in powerful protections against his godly fire. Helios did not like me, no. But he *hated* Medea's presumptuous magic. To be released from his torment, he needed his granddaughter dead.

I wondered, not for the first time, why we Greek deities had never created a god of family therapy. We certainly could have used one. Or perhaps we had one before I was born, and she quit. Or Kronos swallowed her whole.

Whatever the case, I told the flames, "I will do this. I will free you. But you must let us pass."

Instantly, the fires raced away as if a tear had opened in the universe.

I gasped. My skin steamed. My arctic camouflage was now a lightly toasted gray. But I was alive. The room around me cooled rapidly. The flames, I realized, had retreated down a single tunnel that led from the chamber.

"Meg! Grover!" I called. "You can come down—"

Meg dropped on top of me, squashing me flat.

"Ow!" I screamed. "Not like that!"

Grover was more courteous. He climbed down the wall and dropped to the floor with goat-worthy dexterity. He smelled like a burnt wool blanket. His face was badly sunburned. His cap had fallen into the fire, revealing the tips of his horns, which steamed like miniature volcanoes. Meg had somehow come through just fine. She'd even managed to retract her sword from the wall before falling. She pulled her canteen from her supply belt, drank most of the water, and handed the rest to Grover.

"Thanks," I grumbled.

"You beat the heat," she noted. "Good job. Finally had a godly burst of power?"

"Er…I think it was more about Helios deciding to give us a pass. He wants out of this maze as much as we want *him* out. He wants us to kill Medea."

Grover gulped. "So…she's down here? She didn't die on that yacht?"

"Figures." Meg squinted down the steaming corridor. "Did Helios promise not to burn us if you mess up any more answers?"

"I—That wasn't my fault!"

"Yeah," Meg said.

"Kinda was," Grover agreed.

Honestly. I fall into a blazing pit, negotiate a truce with a Titan, and flush a firestorm out of the room to save my friends, and they still want to talk about how I can't recall instructions from the Farmer's Almanac.

"I don't think we can count on Helios *never* to burn us," I said, "any more than we can expect Herophile not to use word puzzles. It's just their nature. This was a onetime get-out-of-the-flames-free card."

Grover smothered the tips of his horns. "Well, then, let's not waste it."

"Right." I hitched up my slightly toasted camouflage pants and tried to recapture that confident tone I'd had the first time I addressed my sun horses. "Follow me. I'm sure it'll be fine!"

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Congratulations
You finished the word puzzle
You win . . . enemies

FINE, in this case, meant *fine if you enjoy lava, chains, and evil magic*.

The corridor led straight to the chamber of the Oracle, which on the one hand…hooray! On the other hand, not so wonderful. The room was a rectangle the size of a basketball court. Lining the walls were half a dozen entrances—each a simple stone doorway with a small landing that overhung the pool of lava I'd seen in my visions. Now, though, I realized the bubbling and shimmering substance was not lava. It was the divine ichor of Helios—hotter than lava, more powerful than rocket fuel, *impossible* to get out if you spilled it on your clothes (I could tell you from personal experience). We had reached the very center of the maze—the holding tank for Helios's power.

Floating on the surface of the ichor were large stone tiles, each about five feet square, making columns and rows that had no logical patterns.

"It's a crossword," Grover said.

Of course he was right. Unfortunately, none of the stone bridges connected with our little balcony. Nor did any of them lead to the opposite side of the room, where the Sibyl of Erythraea sat forlornly on her stone platform. Her home wasn't any better than a solitary-confinement cell. She'd been provided with a cot, a table, and a toilet. (And, yes, even immortal Sibyls need to use the toilet. Some of their best prophecies come to them… Never mind.)

My heart ached to see Herophile in such conditions. She looked exactly as I remembered her: a young woman with braided auburn hair and pale skin, her solid athletic build a tribute to her hardy naiad mother and her stout shepherd father. The Sibyl's white robes were stained with smoke and spotted with cinder burns. She was intently watching an entrance on the wall to her left, so she didn't seem to notice us.

“That’s her?” Meg whispered.

“Unless you see another Oracle,” I said.

“Well, then *talk* to her.”

I wasn’t sure why I had to do all the work, but I cleared my throat and yelled across the boiling lake of ichor, “Herophile!”

The Sibyl jumped to her feet. Only then did I notice the chains—molten links, just as I’d seen in my visions, shackled to her wrists and ankles, anchoring her to the platform and allowing her just enough room to move from one side to the other. Oh, the indignity!

“Apollo!”

I’d been hoping her face might light up with joy when she saw me. Instead, she looked mostly shocked.

“I thought you would come through the other…” Her voice seized up. She grimaced with concentration, then blurted out, “Seven letters, ends in *Y*.”

“Doorway?” Grover guessed.

Across the surface of the lake, stone tiles ground and shifted formation. One block wedged itself against our little platform. Half a dozen more stacked up beyond it, making a seven-tile bridge extending into the room. Glowing golden letters appeared along the tiles, starting with a *Y* at our feet: *DOORWAY.*

Herophile clapped excitedly, jangling her molten chains. “Well done! Hurry!”

I was not anxious to test my weight on a stone raft floating over a burning lake of ichor, but Meg strode right out, so Grover and I followed.

“No offense, Miss Lady,” Meg called to the Sibyl, “but we already almost fell into one lava fire thingie. Could you just make a bridge from here to there without more puzzles?”

“I wish I could!” said Herophile. “This is my curse! It’s either talk like this or stay completely—” She gagged. “Nine letters. Fifth letter is *D*.”

“Quiet!” Grover yelled.

Our raft rumbled and rocked. Grover windmilled his arms and might have fallen off had Meg not caught him. Thank goodness for short people. They have low centers of gravity.

“Not *quiet*!” I yelped. “That is not our final answer! That would be idiotic, since *quiet* is only five letters and doesn’t even have a *D*.” I glared at the satyr.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I got excited.”

Meg studied the tiles. In the frames of her glasses, her rhinestones glinted red. *“Quietude?”* she suggested. “That’s nine letters.”

“First of all,” I said, “I’m impressed you know that word. Second, context. ‘Stay completely *quietude*’ doesn’t make sense. Also, the *D* would be in the

wrong place."

"Then what's the answer, smarty-god?" she demanded. "And don't get it wrong this time."

Such unfairness! I tried to come up with synonyms for *quiet*. I couldn't think of many. I liked music and poetry. Silence really wasn't my thing.

"*Soundless*," I said at last. "That's got to be it."

The tiles rewarded us by forming a second bridge—nine across, *SOUNDLESS*, connecting to the first bridge by the *D*. Unfortunately, since the new bridge led sideways, it got us no closer to the Oracle's platform.

"Herophile," I called, "I appreciate your predicament. But is there any way you can manipulate the length of the answers? Perhaps the next one can be a really long, really easy word that leads to your platform?"

"You know I cannot, Apollo." She clasped her hands. "But, please, you *must* hurry if you wish to stop Caligula from becoming a…" She gagged. "Three letters, middle letter is *O*."

"*God*," I said unhappily.

A third bridge formed—three tiles, connecting to the *O* in *soundless*, which brought us only one tile closer to our goal. Meg, Grover, and I crowded together on the *G* tile. The room felt even hotter, as if Helios's ichor was working itself into a fury the closer we got to Herophile. Grover and Meg sweated profusely. My own arctic camouflage was sopping wet. I had not been so uncomfortable in a group hug since the Rolling Stones' first 1969 show at Madison Square Garden. (Tip: As tempting as it might be, don't throw your arms around Mick Jagger and Keith Richards during their encore set. Those men can *sweat*.)

Herophile sighed. "I'm sorry, my friends. I'll try again. Some days, I wish prophecy was a present I had never—" She winced in pain. "Six letters. Last letter is a *D*."

Grover shuffled around. "Wait. What? The *D* is back there."

The heat made my eyes feel like shish-kebab onions, but I tried to survey the rows and columns so far.

"Perhaps," I said, "this new clue is another vertical word, branching off the *D* in *soundless*?"

Herophile's eyes gleamed with encouragement.

Meg wiped her sweaty forehead. "Well, then why did we bother with *god*? It doesn't lead anywhere."

"Oh, no," Grover moaned. "We're still forming the prophecy, aren't we? *Doorway, soundless, god?* What does that mean?"

"I—I don't know," I admitted, my brain cells simmering in my skull like chicken soup noodles. "Let's get some more words. Herophile said she wishes prophecy was a present she'd never…what?"

"*Gotten* doesn't work," Meg muttered.

"Received?" Grover offered. "No. Too many letters."

"Perhaps a metaphor," I suggested. "A present she'd never…*opened*?"

Grover gulped. "Is that our final answer?"

He and Meg both looked down at the burning ichor, then back at me. Their faith in my abilities was not heartwarming.

"Yes," I decided. "Herophile, the answer is *opened*."

The Sibyl sighed with relief as a new bridge extended from the *D* in *soundless*, leading us across the lake. Crowded together on the *O* tile, we were now only about five feet from the Sibyl's platform.

"Should we jump?" Meg asked.

Herophile shrieked, then clamped her hands over her mouth.

"I'm guessing a jump would be unwise," I said. "We have to complete the puzzle. Herophile, perhaps one more very small word going forward?"

The Sibyl curled her fingers, then said slowly and carefully, "Small word, across. Starts with *Y*. Small word down. *Near or next to."*

"A double play!" I looked at my friends. "I believe we are looking for *yo* across, and *by* down. That should allow us to reach the platform."

Grover peered over the side of the tile, where the lake of ichor was now bubbling white hot. "I'd hate to fail now. Is *yo* an acceptable word?"

"I don't have the Scrabble rule book in front of me," I admitted, "but I think so."

I was glad this wasn't Scrabble. Athena won every time with her insufferable vocabulary. One time she played *abaxial* on a triple and Zeus lightning-bolted the top off Mount Parnassus in his rage.

"That's our answer, Sibyl," I said. "*Yo* and *by*."

Another two tiles clicked into place, connecting our bridge to Herophile's platform. We ran across, and Herophile clapped and wept for joy. She held out her arms to hug me, then seemed to remember she was shackled with blazing-hot chains.

Meg looked back at the path of answers in our wake. "Okay, so if that's the end of the prophecy, what does it mean? *Doorway soundless god opened yo by?"*

Herophile started to say something, then thought better of it. She looked at me hopefully.

"Let's assume some small words again," I ventured. "If we combine the first part of the maze, we have *Apollo faces death in Tarquin's tomb unless*…uh, *the doorway*…to?" I glanced at Herophile, who nodded encouragement. *"The doorway to the soundless god*…Hmm. I don't know who that is. *Unless the doorway to the soundless god is opened by—"*

"You forgot the *yo*," Grover said.

“I think we can bypass the *yo* since it was a double play.”

Grover tugged his singed goatee. “This is why I don’t play Scrabble. Also, I tend to eat the tiles.”

I consulted Herophile. “So Apollo—me—I face death in the tomb of Tarquin, unless the doorway to the soundless god is opened by…what? Meg’s right. There’s got to be more to the prophecy.”

Somewhere off to my left, a familiar voice called, “Not necessarily.”

On a ledge in the middle of the left-hand wall stood the sorceress Medea, looking very much alive and delighted to see us. Behind her, two pandos guards held a chained and beaten prisoner—our friend Crest.

“Hello, my dears.” Medea smiled. “You see, there doesn’t have to be an end to the prophecy, because you’re all going to die now anyway!”

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Meg sings. It's over.
Everybody just go home
We are so roasted

MEG struck first.

With quick, sure moves, she severed the chains that bound the Sibyl, then glared at Medea as if to say *Ha-ha! I have unleashed my attack Oracle!*

The shackles fell from Herophile's wrists and ankles, revealing ugly red burn rings. Herophile stumbled back, clutching her hands to her chest. She looked more horror-struck than grateful. "Meg McCaffrey, no! You shouldn't have—"

Whatever clue she was going to give, across or down, it didn't matter. The chains and shackles snapped back together, fully mended. Then they leaped like striking rattlesnakes—at me, not Herophile. They lashed themselves around my wrists and ankles. The pain was so intense it felt cool and pleasant at first. Then I screamed.

Meg hacked at the molten links once again, but now they repelled her blades. With each blow, the chains tightened, pulling me down until I was forced to crouch. With all my insignificant strength, I struggled against the bonds, but I quickly learned this was a bad idea. Tugging against the manacles was like pressing my wrists against red-hot griddles. The agony almost made me pass out, and the smell…oh, gods, I did *not* enjoy the smell of deep-fried Lester. Only by staying perfectly neutral, allowing the manacles to take me where they wished, could I keep the pain at a level that was merely excruciating.

Medea laughed, clearly enjoying my contortions. "Well done, Meg McCaffrey! I was going to chain up Apollo myself, but you saved me a spell."

I fell to my knees. "Meg, Grover—get the Sibyl out of here. Leave me!"

Another brave, self-sacrificing gesture. I hope you're keeping count.

Alas, my suggestion was futile. Medea snapped her fingers. The stone tiles shifted across the surface of the ichor, leaving the Sibyl's platform cut off from any exit.

Behind the sorceress, her two guards shoved Crest to the floor. He slid down, his back to the wall, his hands shackled but still stubbornly holding my combat ukulele. The pandos's left eye was swollen shut. His lips were split. Two fingers on his right hand were bent at a funny angle. He met my eyes, his expression full of shame. I wanted to reassure him that he had not failed. We should never have left him alone on guard duty. He would still be able to do amazing fingerpicking, even with two broken fingers!

But I could barely think straight, much less console my young music student.

The two guards spread their giant ears. They sailed across the room, letting hot updrafts carry them to separate tiles near the corners of our platform. They drew their khanda blades and waited, just in case we were foolish enough to try leaping across.

"You killed Timbre," one hissed.

"You killed Peak," said the other.

On her landing, Medea chuckled. "You see, Apollo, I picked a couple of highly motivated volunteers! The rest were clamoring to accompany me down here, but—"

"There's more outside?" Meg asked. I couldn't tell if she found this idea helpful (*Hooray, fewer to kill now!*) or depressing (*Boo, more to kill later!*).

"Absolutely, my dear," Medea said. "Even if you had some foolish idea about getting past us, it wouldn't matter. Not that Flutter and Decibel will let that happen. Eh, boys?"

"I'm Flutter," said Flutter.

"I'm Decibel," said Decibel. "May we kill them now?"

"Not just yet," Medea said. "Apollo is right where I need him, ready to be dissolved. As for the rest of you, just relax. If you try to interfere, I *will* have Flutter and Decibel kill you. Then your blood might spill into the ichor, which would mess up the purity of the mixture." She spread her hands. "You understand. We can't have tainted ichor. I only need Apollo's essence for this recipe."

I did not like the way she talked about me as if I were already dead—just one more ingredient, no more important than toad's eye or sassafras.

"I will *not* be dissolved," I growled.

"Oh, Lester," she said. "You kind of *will*."

The chains tightened further, forcing me to all fours. I couldn't understand how Herophile had endured this pain for so long. Then again, she was still immortal. I was not.

"Let it begin!" Medea cried.

She began to chant.

The ichor glowed a pure white, bleaching the color from the room. Miniature stone tiles with sharp edges seemed to shift under my skin, flaying away my mortal form, rearranging me into a new kind of puzzle in which *none* of the answers was *Apollo*. I screamed. I spluttered. I might have begged for my life. Fortunately for what little dignity I had left, I couldn't form the words.

Out of the corner of my eye, in the hazy depths of my agony, I was dimly aware of my friends backing away, terrified by the steam and fire now erupting from cracks in my body.

I didn't blame them. What could they do? At the moment, I was more likely to explode than Macro's family-fun grenade packs, and my wrapping was not *nearly* as tamper-resistant.

"Meg," Grover said, fumbling with his panpipe, "I'm going to do a nature song. See if I can disrupt that chanting, maybe summon help."

Meg gripped her blades. "In this heat? Underground?"

"Nature's all we've got!" he said. "Cover me!"

He began to play. Meg stood guard, her swords raised. Even Herophile helped, balling her fists, ready to show the pandai how Sibyls dealt with ruffians back in Erythraea.

The pandai didn't seem to know how to react. They winced at the noise of the pipes, curling their ears around their heads like turbans, but they didn't attack. Medea had told them not to. And as shaky as Grover's music was, they seemed unsure as to whether or not it constituted an act of aggression.

Meanwhile, I was busy trying not to be flayed into nothingness. Every bit of my willpower bent instinctively to keeping myself in one piece. I was Apollo, wasn't I? I…I was beautiful and people loved me. The world needed me!

Medea's chant undermined my resolve. Her ancient Colchian lyrics wormed their way into my mind. Who needed old gods? Who cared about Apollo? Caligula was much more interesting! He was better suited to this modern world. He fit. I did not. Why didn't I just let go? Then I could be at peace.

Pain is an interesting thing. You think you have reached your limit and you can't possibly feel more tortured. Then you discover there is still another level of agony. And another level after that. The stone tiles under my skin cut and shifted and ripped. Fires burst like sun flares across my pathetic mortal body, blasting straight through Macro's cheap discount arctic camouflage. I lost track of who I was, why I was fighting to stay alive. I wanted so badly to give up, just so the pain would stop.

Then Grover found his groove. His notes became more confident and lively, his cadence steadier. He played a fierce, desperate jig—the sort that

satyrs piped in springtime in the meadows of ancient Greece, hoping to encourage dryads to come forth and dance with them in the wildflowers.

The song was hopelessly out of place in this fiery crossword dungeon. No nature spirit could possibly hear it. No dryads would come to dance with us. Nevertheless, the music dulled my pain. It lessened the intensity of the heat, like a cold towel pressed against my feverish forehead.

Medea's chant faltered. She scowled at Grover. "Really? Are you going to stop that, or must I make you?"

Grover played even more frenetically—a distress call to nature that echoed through the room, making the corridors reverberate like the pipes of a church organ.

Meg abruptly joined in, singing nonsense lyrics in a terrible monotone. "Hey, how about that nature? We love those plants. Come on down, you dryads, and, uh, grow and…kill this sorceress and stuff."

Herophile, who had once had such a lovely voice, who had been born singing prophecies, looked at Meg in dismay. With saintlike restraint, she did not punch Meg in the face.

Medea sighed. "Okay, that's it. Meg, I'm sorry. But I'm sure Nero will forgive me for killing you when I explain how badly you sang. Flutter, Decibel—silence them."

Behind the sorceress, Crest gurgled in alarm. He fumbled with his ukulele, despite his bound hands and two crushed fingers.

Meanwhile, Flutter and Decibel grinned with delight. "Now we shall have revenge! DIE! DIE!"

They unfurled their ears, raised their swords, and leaped toward the platform.

Could Meg have defeated them with her trusty scimitars?

I don't know. Instead, she made a move almost as surprising as her sudden urge to sing. Maybe, looking at poor Crest, she decided that enough pandos blood had been shed. Maybe she was still thinking about her misdirected anger, and whom she should *really* spend her energy hating. Whatever the case, her scimitars flicked into ring form. She grabbed a packet from her belt and ripped it open—spraying seeds in the path of the oncoming pandai.

Flutter and Decibel veered and screamed as the plants erupted, covering them in fuzzy green nebulae of ragweed. Flutter smacked into the nearest wall and began sneezing violently, the ragweed rooting him in place like a fly on flypaper. Decibel crash-landed on the platform at Meg's feet, the ragweed growing over him until he looked more like a bush than a pandos—a bush that sneezed a lot.

Medea face-palmed. "You know…I told Caligula that dragon's teeth warriors make *much* better guards. But *noooo*. He *insisted* on hiring pandai." She shook her head in disgust. "Sorry, boys. You had your chance."

She snapped her fingers again. A ventus swirled to life, pulling a cyclone of cinders from the ichor lake. The spirit shot toward Flutter, ripped the screaming pandos from the wall, and dumped him unceremoniously into the fire. Then it swept across the platform, grazing my friends' feet, and pushed Decibel, still sneezing and crying, off the side.

"Now, then," Medea said, "if I can encourage the rest of you to BE QUIET…"

The ventus charged, encircling Meg and Grover, lifting them off the platform.

I cried out, thrashing in my chains, sure that Medea would hurl my friends into the fire, but they merely hung there suspended. Grover was still playing his pipes, though no sound came through the wind; Meg was scowling and shouting, probably something like *THIS AGAIN? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?*

Herophile was not caught in the ventus. I supposed Medea considered her no threat. She stepped to my side, her fists still clenched. I was grateful for that, but I didn't see what one boxing Sibyl could do against the power of Medea.

"Okay!" Medea said, a glint of triumph in her eyes. "I'll start again. Doing this chant while controlling a ventus is not easy work, though, so please, behave. Otherwise I might lose my concentration and dump Meg and Grover into the ichor. And, really, we have too many impurities in there already, what with the pandai and the ragweed. Now, where were we? Oh, yes! Flaying your mortal form!"

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42

You want prophecy?
I'll drop some nonsense on you
Eat my gibberish!

"RESIST!" Herophile knelt at my side. "Apollo, you must resist!"

I could not speak through the pain. Otherwise I would have told her *Resist. Gosh, thanks for that profound wisdom! You must be an Oracle or something!*

At least she did not ask me to spell out the word *RESIST* on stone tiles.

Sweat poured down my face. My body sizzled, and not in the good way that it used to when I was a god.

The sorceress continued her chant. I knew she must be straining her power, but this time I didn't see how I could take advantage of it. I was chained. I couldn't pull the arrow-in-the-chest trick, and even if I did, I suspected Medea was far enough along with her magic that she could just let me die. My essence would trickle into the pool of ichor.

I couldn't pipe like Grover. I couldn't rely on ragweed like Meg. I didn't have the sheer power of Jason Grace to break through the ventus cage and save my friends.

Resist….But with what?

My consciousness began to waver. I tried to hold on to the day of my birth (yes, I could remember that far back), when I jumped from my mother's womb and began to sing and dance, filling the world with my glorious voice. I remembered my first trip into the chasm of Delphi, grappling with my enemy Python, feeling his coils around my immortal body.

Other memories were more treacherous. I remembered riding the sun chariot through the sky, but I was not myself…I was Helios, Titan of the sun, lashing my fiery whip across the backs of my steeds. I saw myself painted golden, with a crown of rays on my brow, moving through a crowd of adoring

mortal worshippers—but I was Emperor Caligula, the New Sun.

Who was I?

I tried to picture my mother Leto's face. I could not. My father, Zeus, with his terrifying glower, was only a hazy impression. My sister—surely, I could never forget my twin! But even her features floated indistinctly in my mind. She had silvery eyes. She smelled of honeysuckle. What else? I panicked. I couldn't remember her name. I couldn't remember my *own* name.

I splayed my fingers on the stone floor. They smoked and crumbled like twigs in a fire. My body seemed to pixelate, the way the pandai had when they disintegrated.

Herophile spoke in my ear, "Hold on! Help will arrive!"

I didn't see how she could know that, even if she was an Oracle. Who would come to my rescue? Who *could*?

"You have taken my place," she said. "Use that!"

I moaned in rage and frustration. Why was she talking nonsense? Why couldn't she go back to speaking in riddles? How was I supposed to *use* being in her place, in her chains? I wasn't an Oracle. I wasn't even a god anymore. I was…Lester? Oh, perfect. *That* name I could remember.

I gazed across the rows and columns of stone blocks, now all blank, as if waiting for a new challenge. The prophecy wasn't complete. Maybe if I could find a way to finish it…would it make a difference?

It *had* to. Jason had given his life so I could make it this far. My friends had risked everything. I could not simply give up. To free the Oracle, to free Helios from this Burning Maze…I had to finish what we'd started.

Medea's chant droned on, aligning itself to my pulse, taking charge of my mind. I needed to override it, to disrupt it the way Grover had done with his music.

You have taken my place, Herophile had said.

I was Apollo, the god of prophecy. It was time for me to be my own Oracle.

I forced myself to concentrate on the stone blocks. Veins popped along my forehead like firecrackers under my skin. I stammered out, "*B-bronze upon gold*."

The stone tiles shifted, forming a row of three tiles in the far upper left corner of the room, one word per square: *BRONZE UPON GOLD*.

"Yes!" the Sibyl said. "Yes, exactly! Keep going!"

The effort was horrible. The chains burned, dragging me down. I whimpered in agony, "*East meets west*."

A second row of three tiles moved into position under the first, blazing with the words I'd just spoken.

More lines poured out of me:

“Legions are redeemed.
Light the depths;
One against many,
Never spirit defeated.
Ancient words spoken,
Shaking old foundations!”

What did that all mean? I had no idea.

The room rumbled as more blocks shifted into place, new stones rising from the lake to accommodate the sheer number of words. The entire left side of the lake was now roofed by the eight rows of three tile-wide words, like a pool cover rolled halfway over the ichor. The heat lessened. My shackles cooled. Medea’s chant faltered, releasing its hold on my consciousness.

“What is this?” hissed the sorceress. “We’re too close to stop now! I *will* kill your friends if you don’t—”

Behind her, Crest strummed a suspended fourth on the ukulele. Medea, who had apparently forgotten about him, almost leaped into the lava.

“You too?” she shouted at him. “LET ME WORK!”

Herophile whispered in my ear, “Hurry!”

I understood. Crest was trying to buy me time by distracting Medea. He stubbornly continued playing his (my) ukulele—a series of the most jarring chords I’d taught him, and some he must have been making up on the spot. Meanwhile Meg and Grover spun in their ventus cage, trying to break free without any luck. One flick of Medea’s fingers and they would meet the same fate as Flutter and Decibel.

Starting my voice again was even more difficult than towing the sun chariot out of the mud. (Don’t ask about that. Long story involving attractive swamp naiads.)

Somehow, I croaked out another line: *“Destroy the tyrant.”*

Three more tiles lined up, this time in the upper-right corner of the room.

“Aid the winged,” I continued.

Good gods, I thought. *I’m speaking gibberish!* But the stones continued to follow the guidance of my voice, much better than Alexasiriastrophona had ever done.

“Under golden hills,
Great stallion’s foal.”

The tiles continued stacking, forming a second column of three-tile lines that left only a thin strip of the fiery lake visible down the middle of the room.

Medea tried to ignore the pandos. She resumed her chanting, but Crest immediately broke her concentration again with an A-flat minor sharp 5.

The sorceress shrieked. “Enough of that, pandos!” She pulled a dagger from the folds of her dress.

“Apollo, don’t stop,” Herophile warned. “You must not—”

Medea stabbed Crest in the gut, cutting off his dissonant serenade.

I sobbed in horror, but somehow forced out more lines:

“Harken the trumpets,” I croaked, my voice almost gone. *“Turn red tides __”*

“Stop that!” Medea shouted at me. “Ventus, throw the prisoners—”

Crest strummed an even uglier chord.

“GAH!” The sorceress turned and stabbed Crest again.

“Enter stranger’s home,” I sobbed.

Another suspended fourth from Crest, another jab from Medea’s blade.

“Regain lost glory!” I yelled. The last stone tiles shifted into place—completing the second column of lines from the far side of the room to the edge of our platform.

I could *feel* the prophecy’s completion, as welcome as a breath of air after a long underwater swim. The flames of Helios, now visible only along the center of the room, cooled to a red simmer, no worse than your average five-alarm fire.

“Yes!” Herophile said.

Medea turned, snarling. Her hands glistened with the pandos’s blood. Behind her, Crest fell sideways, groaning, pressing the ukulele to his ruined gut.

“Oh, well done, *Apollo*,” Medea sneered. “You made this pandos die for your sake, for *nothing*. My magic is far enough along. I’ll just flay you the old-fashioned way.” She hefted her knife. “And as for your friends…”

She snapped her bloody fingers. “Ventus, kill them!”

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43

Favorite chapter
Because only one bad death
That is just messed up

THEN she died.

I won't lie, gentle reader. Most of this narrative has been painful to write, but that last line was pure pleasure. Oh, the look on Medea's face!

But I should rewind.

How did it happen, this most welcome fluke of fate?

Medea froze. Her eyes widened. She fell to her knees, the knife clattering from her hand. She toppled over face-first, revealing a newcomer behind her —Piper McLean, dressed in leather armor over her street clothes, her lip newly stitched, her face still badly bruised but filled with resolve. Her hair was singed around the edges. A fine layer of ash coated her arms. Her dagger, Katoptris, now protruded from Medea's back.

Behind Piper stood a group of warrior maidens, seven in all. At first, I thought the Hunters of Artemis had come to save me yet again, but these warriors were armed with shields and spears made of honey-gold wood.

Behind me, the ventus unspooled, dropping Meg and Grover to the floor. My molten chains crumbled to charcoal dust. Herophile caught me as I fell over.

Medea's hands twitched. She turned her face sideways and opened her mouth, but no words came out.

Piper knelt next to her. She placed her hand almost tenderly on the sorceress's shoulder, then with her other hand, removed Katoptris from between Medea's shoulder blades.

"One good stab in the back deserves another." Piper kissed Medea on the cheek. "I'd tell you to say hello to Jason for me, but he'll be in Elysium. You…won't."

The sorceress's eyes rolled up in her head. She stopped moving. Piper glanced back at her wood-armored allies. "How about we dump her?"

"GOOD CALL!" the seven maidens shouted in unison. They marched forward, lifted the body of Medea, and tossed it unceremoniously into the fiery pool of her own grandfather.

Piper wiped her bloody dagger on her jeans. With her swollen, stitched-up mouth, her smile was more gruesome than friendly. "Hi, guys."

I let out a heartbroken sob, which was probably not what Piper expected. Somehow, I got to my feet, ignoring the searing pain in my ankles, and ran past her to the place where Crest lay, gurgling weakly.

"Oh, brave friend." My eyes burned with tears. I cared nothing for my own excruciating pain, the way my skin screamed when I tried to move.

Crest's furry face was slack with shock. Blood speckled his snowy white fur. His midsection was a glistening mess. He clutched the ukulele as if it were the only thing anchoring him to the world of the living.

"You saved us," I said, choking on the words. "You—you bought us just enough time. I will find a way to heal you."

He locked eyes with me and managed to croak, "Music. God."

I laughed nervously. "Yes, my young friend. You are a music god! I—I will teach you every chord. We will have a concert with the Nine Muses. When—when I get back to Olympus…"

My voice faltered.

Crest was no longer listening. His eyes had turned glassy. His tortured muscles relaxed. His body crumbled, collapsing inward until the ukulele sat on a pile of dust—a small, sad monument to my many failures.

I don't know how long I knelt there, dazed and shaking. It hurt to sob. I sobbed anyway.

Finally, Piper crouched next to me. Her face was sympathetic, but I thought somewhere behind her lovely multicolored eyes she was thinking *Another life lost for your sake, Lester. Another death you couldn't fix.*

She did not say that. She sheathed her knife. "We grieve later," she said. "Right now, our job isn't done."

Our job. She had come to our aid, despite everything that had happened, despite Jason….I could not fall apart now. At least, no more than I had already.

I picked up the ukulele. I was about to mutter some promise to Crest's dust. Then I remembered what came from my broken promises. I had vowed to teach the young pandos any instrument he wished. Now he was dead. Despite the searing heat of the room, I felt the cold stare of Styx upon me.

I leaned on Piper as she helped me across the room—back to the platform where Meg, Grover, and Herophile waited.

The seven women warriors stood nearby as if waiting for orders.

Like their shields, their armor was fashioned from cleverly fitted planks of honey-gold wood. The women were imposing, each perhaps seven feet tall, their faces as polished and beautifully turned as their armor. Their hair, in various shades of white, blond, gold, and pale brown, spilled down their backs in waterfall braids. Chlorophyll green tinted their eyes and the veins of their well-muscled limbs.

They were dryads, but not like any dryads I'd ever met.

"You're the Meliai," I said.

The women regarded me with disturbingly keen interest, as if they would be equally delighted to fight me, dance with me, or toss me into the fire.

The one on the far left spoke. "We are the Meliai. Are you the Meg?"

I blinked. I got the feeling they were looking for a *yes*, but as confused as I was, I was pretty sure I was not the Meg.

"Hey, guys," Piper intervened, pointing to Meg. "This is Meg McCaffrey."

The Meliai broke into a double-time march, lifting their knees higher than was strictly necessary. They closed ranks, forming a semicircle in front of Meg like they were doing a marching-band maneuver. They stopped, banged their spears once against their shields, then lowered their heads in respect.

"ALL HAIL THE MEG!" they cried. "DAUGHTER OF THE CREATOR!"

Grover and Herophile edged into the corner, as if trying to hide behind the Sibyl's toilet.

Meg studied the seven dryads. My young master's hair was windswept from the ventus. The electrical tape had come off her glasses, so she looked like she was wearing mismatched rhinestone-encrusted monocles. Her clothes had once again been reduced to a collection of burned, shredded rags—all of which, in my opinion, made her look exactly like *The Meg* should look.

She summoned her usual eloquence: "Hi."

Piper's mouth curved in the ghost of a smile. "I met these guys at the entrance to the maze. They were just charging in to find you. Said they heard your song."

"My song?" Meg asked.

"The music!" Grover yelped. "It worked?"

"We heard the call of nature!" cried the lead dryad.

That had a different meaning for mortals, but I decided not to mention it.

"We heard the pipes of a lord of the Wild!" said another dryad. "That would be you, I suppose, satyr. Hail, satyr!"

"HAIL, SATYR!" the others echoed.

"Uh, yeah," Grover said weakly. "Hail to you too."

"But mostly," said a third dryad, "we heard the cry of the Meg, daughter of the creator. Hail!"

“HAIL!” the others echoed.

That was quite enough hailing for me.

Meg narrowed her eyes. “When you say *creator*, do you mean my dad, the botanist, or my mom, Demeter?”

The dryads murmured among themselves.

Finally, the leader spoke: “This is a most excellent point. We meant the McCaffrey, the great grower of dryads. But now we realize that you are also the daughter of Demeter. You are twice-blessed, daughter of two creators! We are at your service!”

Meg picked her nose. “At my service, huh?” She looked at me as if to ask *Why can’t you be a cool servant like this?* “So, how did you guys find us?”

“We have many powers!” shouted one. “We were born from the Earth Mother’s blood!”

“The primordial strength of life flows through us!” said another.

“We nursed Zeus as a baby!” said a third. “We bore an entire race of men, the warlike Bronze!”

“We are the Meliai!” said a fourth.

“We are the mighty ash trees!” cried the fifth.

This left the last two without much to say. They simply muttered, “Ash. Yep; we’re ash.”

Piper chimed in. “So Coach Hedge got Grover’s message from the cloud nymph. Then I came to find you guys. But I didn’t know where this secret entrance was, so I went to downtown LA again.”

“By *yourself*?” Grover asked.

Piper’s eyes darkened. I realized she had come here first and foremost to get revenge on Medea, secondly to help us. Making it out alive…that had been a very distant third on her list of priorities.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I met these ladies downtown and we sort of made an alliance.”

Grover gulped. “But Crest said the main entrance would be a death trap! It was heavily guarded!”

“Yeah, it was….” Piper pointed at the dryads. “Not anymore.”

The dryads looked pleased with themselves.

“The ash is mighty,” said one.

The others murmured in agreement.

Herophile stepped out from her hiding place behind the toilet. “But the fires. How did you—?”

“Ha!” cried a dryad. “It would take more than the fires of a sun Titan to destroy us!” She held up her shield. One corner was blackened, but the soot was already falling away, revealing new, unblemished wood underneath.

Judging from Meg’s scowl, I could tell her mind was working overtime. That made me nervous.

“So…you guys serve me now?” she asked.

The dryads banged their shields again in unison.

“We will obey the commands of the Meg!” said the leader.

“Like, if I asked you to go get me some enchiladas—?”

“We would ask how many!” shouted another dryad. “And how hot you like your salsa!”

Meg nodded. “Cool. But first, maybe you could escort us safely out of the maze?”

“It shall be done!” said the lead dryad.

“Hold on,” Piper said. “What about…?”

She gestured to the floor tiles, where my golden nonsense words still glowed across the stone.

While kneeling in chains, I hadn’t really been able to appreciate their arrangement:

BRONZE UPON GOLD	DESTROY THE TYRANT
EAST MEETS WEST	AID THE WINGED
LEGIONS ARE REDEEMED	UNDER GOLDEN HILLS
LIGHT THE DEPTHS	GREAT STALLION’S FOAL
ONE AGAINST MANY	HARKEN THE TRUMPETS
NEVER SPIRIT DEFEATED	TURN RED TIDES
ANCIENT WORDS SPOKEN	ENTER STRANGER’S HOME
SHAKING OLD FOUNDATIONS	REGAIN LOST GLORY

“What does it mean?” Grover asked, looking at me as if I had the faintest idea.

My mind ached with exhaustion and sorrow. While Crest had distracted Medea, giving Piper time to arrive and save my friends’ lives, I had been spouting nonsense: two columns of text with a fiery margin down the middle. They weren’t even formatted in an interesting font.

“It means Apollo succeeded!” the Sibyl said proudly. “He finished the prophecy!”

I shook my head. “But I didn’t. *Apollo faces death in Tarquin’s Tomb unless the doorway to the soundless god is opened by*…All of that?”

Piper scanned the lines. “That’s a lot of text. Should I write it down?”

The Sibyl’s smile wavered. “You mean…you don’t see it? It’s right there.”

Grover squinted at the golden words. “See what?”

“Oh.” Meg nodded. “Okay, yeah.”

The seven dryads all leaned toward her, fascinated.

“What does it mean, great daughter of the creator?” asked the leader.

“It’s an acrostic,” Meg said. “Look.”

She jogged to the upper left corner of the room. She walked along the first

letter in each line, then hopped across the margin and walked the first letters of the lines in that column, all while saying the letters out loud: "*B-E-L-L-O-N-A-S D-A-U-G-H-T-E-R*."

"Wow." Piper shook her head in amazement. "I'm still not sure what the prophecy means, about Tarquin and a soundless god and all that. But apparently you need the help of Bellona's daughter. That means the senior praetor at Camp Jupiter: Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano."

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Ha-ha-ha, dryads?
That's straight from the horse's mouth
Good-bye, Mr. Horse

"HAIL, the Meg!" cried the lead dryad. "Hail, the solver of the puzzle!"

"HAIL!" the others agreed, followed by much kneeling, banging of spears on shields, and offers to retrieve enchiladas.

I might have argued with Meg's hail-worthiness. If I hadn't just been magically half flayed to death in burning chains, I could have solved the puzzle. I was also pretty sure Meg hadn't known what an acrostic *was* until I explained it to her.

But we had bigger problems. The chamber began to shake. Dust trickled from the ceiling. A few stone tiles fell and splashed into the pool of ichor.

"We must leave," said Herophile. "The prophecy is complete. I am free. This room will not survive."

"I like leaving!" Grover agreed.

I liked leaving, too, but there was one promise I still meant to keep, no matter how much Styx hated me.

I knelt at the edge of the platform and stared into the fiery ichor.

"Uh, Apollo?" Meg asked.

"Should we pull him away?" asked a dryad.

"Should we push him in?" asked another.

Meg didn't respond. Maybe she was weighing which offer sounded better. I tried to focus on the fires below.

"Helios," I murmured, "your imprisonment is over. Medea is dead."

The ichor churned and flashed. I felt the Titan's half-conscious anger. Now that he was free, he seemed to be thinking why shouldn't he vent his power from these tunnels and turn the countryside into a wasteland? He probably also wasn't too happy about getting two pandai, some ragweed, and

his evil granddaughter dumped into his nice, fiery essence.

"You have a right to be angry," I said. "But I remember you—your brilliance, your warmth. I remember your friendship with the gods and the mortals of the earth. I can never be as great a sun deity as you were, but every day I try to honor your memory—to remember your *best* qualities."

The ichor bubbled more rapidly.

I am just talking to a friend, I told myself. *This is not at all like convincing an intercontinental ballistic missile not to launch itself.*

"I will endure," I told him. "I *will* regain the sun chariot. As long as I drive it, you will be remembered. I will keep your old path across the sky steady and true. But you know, more than anyone, that the fires of the sun don't belong on the earth. They weren't meant to destroy the land, but to warm it! Caligula and Medea have twisted you into a weapon. Don't allow them to win! All you have to do is *rest.* Return to the ether of Chaos, my old friend. Be at peace."

The ichor turned white-hot. I was sure my face was about to get an extreme dermal peel.

Then the fiery essence fluttered and shimmered like a pool full of moth wings—and the ichor vanished. The heat dissipated. The stone tiles disintegrated into dust and rained into the empty pit. On my arms, the terrible burns faded. The split skin mended itself. The pain ebbed to a tolerable level of I've-just-been-tortured-for-six-hours agony, and I collapsed, shaking and cold, on the stone floor.

"You did it!" Grover cried. He looked at the dryads, then at Meg, and laughed in amazement. "Can you feel it? The heat wave, the drought, the wildfires…they're gone!"

"Indeed," said the lead dryad. "The Meg's weakling servant has saved nature! Hail to the Meg!"

"HAIL!" the other dryads chimed in.

I didn't even have the energy to protest.

The chamber rumbled more violently. A large crack zigzagged down the middle of the ceiling.

"Let's get out of here." Meg turned to the dryads. "Help Apollo."

"The Meg has spoken!" said the lead dryad.

Two dryads hauled me to my feet and carried me between them. I tried to put weight on my feet, just for dignity's sake, but it was like roller-skating on wheels of wet macaroni.

"You know how to get there?" Grover asked the dryads.

"We do *now,*" said one. "It is the quickest way back to nature, and that is something we can always find."

On a *Help, I'm Going to Die* scale from one to ten, exiting the maze was a

ten. But since everything else I'd done that week was a fifteen, it seemed like a piece of baklava. Tunnel roofs collapsed around us. Floors crumbled. Monsters attacked, only to be stabbed to death by seven eager dryads yelling, "HAIL!"

Finally we reached a narrow shaft that slanted upward toward a tiny square of sunlight.

"This isn't the way we came in," Grover fretted.

"It is close enough," said the lead dryad. "We will go first!"

No one argued. The seven dryads raised their shields and marched single file up the shaft. Piper and Herophile went next, followed by Meg and Grover. I brought up the rear, having recovered enough to crawl on my own with a minimum of weeping and gasping.

By the time I emerged into the sunlight and got to my feet, the battle lines had already been drawn.

We were back in the old bear pit, though how the shaft led us there, I didn't know. The Meliai had formed a shield wall around the tunnel entrance. Behind them stood the rest of my friends, weapons drawn. Above us, lining the ridge of the cement bowl, a dozen pandai waited with arrows nocked in their bows. In their midst stood the great white stallion Incitatus.

When he saw me, he tossed his beautiful mane. "*There* he is at last. Medea couldn't close the deal, huh?"

"Medea is dead," I said. "Unless you run away *now*, you will be next."

Incitatus nickered. "Never liked that sorceress anyway. As for surrendering…Lester, have you looked at yourself lately? You're in no shape to issue threats. We've got the high ground. You've seen how fast pandai can shoot. I don't know who your pretty allies with the wooden armor are, but it doesn't matter. Come along quietly. Big C is sailing north to deal with your friends in the Bay Area, but we can catch up with the fleet easy enough. My boy has *all kinds* of special treats planned for you."

Piper snarled. I suspected that Herophile's hand on her shoulder was the only thing keeping the daughter of Aphrodite from charging the enemy all by herself.

Meg's scimitars gleamed in the afternoon sun. "Hey, ash ladies," she said, "how fast can you get up there?"

The leader glanced over. "Fast enough, O Meg."

"Cool," Meg said. Then she shouted up at the horse and his troops, "Last chance to surrender!"

Incitatus sighed. "Fine."

"Fine, you surrender?" Meg asked.

"No. Fine, we'll kill you. Pandai—"

"Dryads, ATTACK!" Meg yelled.

"Dryads?" Incitatus asked incredulously.

It was the last thing he ever said.

The Meliai leaped out of the pit as if it were no higher than a porch step. The dozen pandai archers, fastest shots in the West, couldn't fire a single arrow before they were cut to dust by ashen spears.

Incitatus whinnied in panic. As the Meliai surrounded him, he reared and kicked with his golden-shod hooves, but even his great strength was no match for the primordial killer tree spirits. The stallion buckled and fell, skewered from seven directions at once.

The dryads faced Meg.

"The deed is done!" announced their leader. "Would the Meg like enchiladas now?"

Next to me, Piper looked vaguely nauseous, as if vengeance had lost some of its appeal. "I thought *my* voice was powerful."

Grover whimpered in agreement. "I've never had nightmares about trees. That might change after today."

Even Meg looked uncomfortable, as if just realizing what sort of power she'd been given. I was relieved to see that discomfort. It was a sure sign that Meg remained a good person. Power makes good people uneasy rather than joyful or boastful. That's why good people so rarely rise to power.

"Let's get out of here," she decided.

"To where shall we get out of here, O Meg?" asked the lead dryad.

"Home," said Meg. "Palm Springs."

There was no bitterness in her voice as she put those words together: *Home. Palm Springs.* She needed to return, like the dryads, to her roots.

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Desert flowers bloom
Sunset rain sweetens the air
Time for a game show!

PIPER did not accompany us.

She said she had to get back to the Malibu house so as not to worry her father or the Hedge family. They would all be leaving for Oklahoma together tomorrow evening. Also, she had some arrangements to attend to. Her dark tone led me to believe she meant *final arrangements*, as in for Jason.

"Meet me tomorrow afternoon." She handed me a folded sheet of dandelion-yellow paper—an N.H. Financials eviction notice. On the back, she'd scribbled an address in Santa Monica. "We'll get you on your way."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but without explanation she hiked toward the nearby golf-course parking lot, no doubt to borrow a Bedrossian-quality vehicle.

The rest of us returned to Palm Springs in the red Mercedes. Herophile drove. Who knew ancient Oracles could drive? Meg sat next to her. Grover and I took the back. I kept staring forlornly at my seat, where Crest had sat only a few hours before, so anxious to learn his chords and become a god of music.

I may have cried.

The seven Meliai marched alongside our Mercedes like secret-service agents, keeping up with us easily, even when we left bumper-to-bumper traffic behind.

Despite our victory, we were a somber crew. No one offered any scintillating conversation. At one point, Herophile tried to break the ice. "I spy with my little eye—"

We responded in unison: "No."

After that, we rode in silence.

The temperature outside cooled at least fifteen degrees. A marine layer had rolled in over the Los Angeles basin like a giant wet duster, soaking up all the dry heat and smoke. When we reached San Bernardino, dark clouds swept the hilltops, dropping curtains of rain on the parched, fire-blackened hills.

When we came over the pass and saw Palm Springs stretched out below us, Grover cried with happiness. The desert was carpeted in wildflowers—marigolds and poppies, dandelions and primroses—all glistening from the rainfall that had just moved through, leaving the air cool and sweet.

Dozens of dryads waited for us on the hilltop outside the Cistern. Aloe Vera fussed over our wounds. Prickly Pear scowled and asked how we could possibly have ruined our clothes yet again. Reba was so delighted she tried to tango with me, though Caligula's sandals really were not designed for fancy footwork. The rest of the assembled host made a wide circle around the Meliai, gawking at them in awe.

Joshua hugged Meg so hard she squeaked. "You did it!" he said. "The fires are *gone*!"

"You don't have to sound so surprised," she grumbled.

"And these…" He faced the Meliai. "I—I saw them emerge from their saplings earlier today. They said they heard a song they had to follow. That was you?"

"Yep." Meg didn't appear to like the way Joshua was staring slack-jawed at the ash dryads. "They're my new minions."

"We are the Meliai!" the leader agreed. She knelt in front of Meg. "We require guidance, O Meg! Where shall we be rooted?"

"Rooted?" Meg asked. "But I thought—"

"We can remain on the hillside where you planted us, Great Meg," the leader said. "But if you wish us to root elsewhere, you must decide quickly! We will soon be too large and strong to transplant!"

I had a sudden image of us buying a pickup truck and filling the bed with dirt, then driving north to San Francisco with seven killer ash trees. I liked that idea. Unfortunately, I knew it wouldn't work. Trees were not big on road trips.

Meg scratched her ear. "If you guys stay here…you'll be okay? I mean, with the desert and all?"

"We will be fine," said the leader.

"Though a little more shade and water would be best," said a second ash.

Joshua cleared his throat. He brushed his fingers self-consciously through his shaggy hair. "We, um, would be most honored to have you! The force of nature is already strong here, but with the Meliai among us—"

"Yeah," Prickly Pear agreed. "Nobody would bother us ever again. We could grow in peace!"

Aloe Vera studied the Meliai doubtfully. I imagined she didn't trust life-

forms that required so little healing. “How far is your range? How much territory can you protect?”

A third Melia laughed. “We marched today to Los Angeles! That was no hardship. If we are rooted here, we can protect everything within a hundred leagues!”

Reba stroked her dark hair. “Is that far enough to cover Argentina?”

“No,” Grover said. “But it would cover pretty much all of Southern California.” He turned to Meg. “What do you think?”

Meg was so tired she was swaying like a sapling. I half expected her to mutter some Megish answer like *dunno* and pass out. Instead, she gestured to the Meliai. “Come over here.”

We all followed her to the edge of the Cistern. Meg pointed down at the shady well with its deep blue pond in the center.

“What about around the pool?” she asked. “Shade. Water. I think…I think my dad would have liked that.”

“The creator’s daughter has spoken!” cried a Melia.

“Daughter of two creators!” said another.

“Twice blessed!”

“Wise solver of puzzles!”

“The Meg!”

This left the last two with little to add, so they muttered, “Yep. The Meg. Yep.”

The other dryads murmured and nodded. Despite the fact that the ash trees would be taking over their enchilada-eating hangout, no one complained.

“A sacred grove of ashes,” I said. “I used to have one like that in ancient times. Meg, it’s perfect.”

I faced the Sibyl, who had been standing silently in back, no doubt stunned to be around so many people after her long captivity.

“Herophile,” I said, “this grove will be well protected. No one, not even Caligula, could ever threaten you here. I won’t tell you what to do. The choice is yours. But would you consider making this your new home?”

Herophile wrapped her arms around herself. Her auburn hair was the same color as the desert hills in the afternoon light. I wondered if she was thinking about how different this hillside was from the one where she was born, where she’d had her cave in Erythraea.

“I could be happy here,” she decided. “My initial thought—and this was just an idea—is that I heard they produce many game shows in Pasadena. I have several ideas for new ones.”

Prickly Pear quivered. “How about you put a pin in that, darling? Join us!”

Putting a pin in something was good advice coming from a cactus.

Aloe Vera nodded. “We would be honored to have an Oracle! You could

warn me whenever anyone is about to get a cold!"

"We would welcome you with open arms," Joshua agreed. "Except for those of us with prickly arms. They would probably just wave at you."

Herophile smiled. "Very well. I would be…" Her voice seized up, as if she were about to start a new prophecy and send us all scrambling.

"Okay!" I said. "No need to thank us! It's decided!"

And so, Palm Springs gained an Oracle, while the rest of the world was saved from several new daytime TV game shows like *Sibyl of Fortune* or *The Oracle Is Right!* It was a win-win.

The rest of the evening was spent making a new camp down the hillside, eating take-out dinner (I chose the enchiladas verdes, thanks for asking), and assuring Aloe Vera that our layers of medicinal goop were thick enough. The Meliai dug up their own saplings and replanted them in the Cistern, which I guessed was the dryad version of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps.

At sunset, their leader came to Meg and bowed low. "We will slumber now. But whenever you call, if we are within range, we shall answer! We shall protect this land in the name of the Meg!"

"Thanks," said the Meg, poetic as always.

The Meliai faded into their seven ash trees, which now made a beautiful ring around the pond. Their branches glowed with a soft, buttery light. The other dryads moved across the hillside, enjoying the cool air and the stars in the smoke-free night sky as they gave the Sibyl a tour of her new home.

"And here are some rocks," they told her. "And over here, these are more rocks."

Grover sat down next to Meg and me with a contented sigh.

The satyr had changed his clothes: a green cap, a fresh tie-dyed shirt, clean jeans, and a new pair of hoof-appropriate New Balance shoes. A backpack was slung on his shoulder. My heart sank to see him dressed for travel, though I was not surprised.

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

He grinned. "Back to Camp Half-Blood."

"Now?" Meg demanded.

He spread his hands. "I've been here for *years*. Thanks to you guys, my work is finally actually done! I mean, I know *you* still have a long way to go, freeing the Oracles and all, but…"

He was too polite to finish the thought: *but please do not ask me to go any farther with you.*

"You deserve to go home," I said wistfully, wishing I could do the same. "But you won't even rest the night?"

Grover got a faraway look in his eyes. "I need to get back. Satyrs aren't dryads, but we have roots, too. Camp Half-Blood is mine. I've been gone too

long. I hope Juniper hasn't gotten herself a new goat…."

I recalled the way the dryad Juniper had fretted and worried about her absent boyfriend when I was at camp.

"I doubt she could ever replace such an excellent satyr," I said. "Thank you, Grover Underwood. We couldn't have succeeded without you and Walt Whitman."

He laughed, but his expression immediately darkened. "I'm just sorry about Jason and…" His gaze fell on the ukulele in my lap. I hadn't let it out of my sight since we returned, though I hadn't had the heart to tune the strings, much less play it.

"Yes," I agreed. "And Money Maker. And all the others who perished trying to find the Burning Maze. Or in the fires, the drought…"

Wow. For a second there, I'd been feeling okay. Grover really knew how to kill a vibe.

His goatee quivered. "I'm sure you guys will make it to Camp Jupiter," he said. "I've never been there, or met Reyna, but I hear she's good people. My buddy Tyson the Cyclops is there too. Tell him I said hi."

I thought about what awaited us in the north. Aside from what we'd gleaned aboard Caligula's yacht—that his attack during the new moon had not gone well—we didn't know what was going on at Camp Jupiter, or whether Leo Valdez was still there or flying back to Indianapolis. All we knew was that Caligula, now without his stallion and his sorceress, was sailing to the Bay Area to deal with Camp Jupiter personally. We had to get there first.

"We will be fine," I said, trying to convince myself. "We've wrested three Oracles from the Triumvirate. Now, aside from Delphi itself, only one source of prophecy remains: the Sibylline Books…or rather, what Ella the harpy is trying to reconstruct of them from memory."

Grover frowned. "Yeah. Ella. Tyson's girlfriend."

He sounded confused, as if it made no sense that a Cyclops would have a harpy girlfriend, much less one with a photographic memory who had somehow become our only link to books of prophecy that had burned up centuries before.

Very little of our situation made sense, but I was a former Olympian. I was used to incoherency.

"Thanks, Grover." Meg gave the satyr a hug and kissed him on the cheek, which was certainly more gratitude than she'd ever shown me.

"You bet," Grover said. "Thank you, Meg. You…" He gulped. "You've been a great friend. I liked talking plants with you."

"I was also there," I said.

Grover smiled sheepishly. He got to his feet and clicked together the chest straps of his backpack. "Sleep well, you guys. And good luck. I have a feeling I'll see you again before…Yeah."

Before I ascend into the heavens and regain my immortal throne?

Before we all die in some miserable fashion at the hands of the Triumvirate?

I wasn't sure. But after Grover left, I felt an empty place in my chest, as if the hole I'd poked with the Arrow of Dodona were growing deeper and wider. I unlaced the sandals of Caligula and tossed them away.

I slept miserably and had a miserable dream.

I lay at the bottom of a cold, dark river. Above me floated a woman in black silky robes—the goddess Styx, the living incarnation of the infernal waters.

"More broken promises," she hissed.

A sob built in my throat. I did not need the reminder.

"Jason Grace is dead," she continued. "And the young pandos."

Crest! I wanted to scream. *He had a name!*

"Do you begin to feel the folly of your rash vow upon my waters?" asked Styx. "There will be more deaths. My wrath will spare no one close to you until amends are made. Enjoy your time as a mortal, Apollo!"

Water began filling my lungs, as if my body had just now remembered it needed oxygen.

I woke up gasping.

Dawn was breaking over the desert. I was hugging my ukulele so tightly it had left gouge marks on my forearms and bruised my chest. Meg's sleeping bag was empty, but before I could look for her, she scrambled down the hill toward me—a strange, excited light in her eyes.

"Apollo, get up," she said. "You need to see this!"

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46

Second prize: Road trip
With Bon Jovi on cassette
First prize: Please, don't ask

THE McCaffrey mansion had been reborn.

Or rather, *regrown*.

Overnight, desert hardwoods had sprouted and grown at incredible speed, forming the beams and floors of a multilevel stilt house much like the old one. Heavy vines had emerged from the stone ruins, weaving together the walls and ceilings, leaving room for windows and skylights shaded by awnings made of wisteria.

The biggest difference in the new house: the great room had been built in a horseshoe shape around the Cistern, leaving the ash grove open to the sky.

"We hope you like it," said Aloe Vera, taking us on a tour. "We all got together and decided it was the least we could do."

The interior was cool and comfortable, with fountains and running water in every room provided by living root pipes from subterranean springs. Blooming cacti and Joshua trees decorated the spaces. Massive branches had shaped themselves into furniture. Even Dr. McCaffrey's old work desk had been lovingly re-created.

Meg sniffled, blinking furiously.

"Oh, dear," said Aloe Vera. "I hope you're not allergic to the house!"

"No, this place is amazing." Meg threw herself into Aloe's arms, ignoring the dryad's many pointy bits.

"Wow," I said. (Meg's poetry must have been rubbing off on me.) "How many nature spirits did it take to accomplish this?"

Aloe shrugged modestly. "Every dryad in the Mojave Desert wanted to help. You saved us all! *And* you restored the Meliai." She gave Meg a gooey kiss on the cheek. "Your father would be so proud. You have completed his

work."

Meg blinked back tears. "I just wish…"

She didn't need to finish. We all knew how many lives had *not* been saved.

"Will you stay?" Aloe asked. "Aeithales is your home."

Meg gazed across the desert vista. I was terrified she would say yes. Her final command to me would be to continue my quests by myself, and this time she would *mean* it. Why shouldn't she? She had found her home. She had friends here, including seven very powerful dryads who would hail her and bring her enchiladas every morning. She could become the protector of Southern California, far from Nero's grasp. She might find peace.

The idea of being free from Meg would have delighted me just a few weeks ago, but now I found the idea insupportable. Yes, I wanted her to be happy. But I knew she had many things yet to do—first among them was facing Nero once again, closing that horrible chapter of her life by confronting and conquering the Beast.

Oh, and also I needed Meg's help. Call me selfish, but I couldn't imagine going on without her.

Meg squeezed Aloe's hand. "Maybe someday. I hope so. But right now… we got places to be."

Grover had generously left us the Mercedes he'd borrowed from…wherever.

After saying our good-byes to Herophile and the dryads, who were discussing plans to create a giant Scrabble-board floor in one of the back bedrooms at Aeithales, we drove to Santa Monica to find the address Piper had given me. I kept looking in the rearview mirror, wondering if the highway patrol would pull us over for car theft. That would've been the perfect end to my week.

It took us a while to find the right address: a small private airfield near the Santa Monica waterfront.

A security guard let us through the gates with no questions, as if he'd been expecting two teenagers in a possibly stolen red Mercedes. We drove straight onto the tarmac.

A gleaming white Cessna was parked near the terminal, right next to Coach Hedge's yellow Pinto. I shuddered, wondering if we were trapped in an episode of *The Oracle Is Right!* First prize: the Cessna. Second prize…No, I couldn't face the idea.

Coach Hedge was changing Baby Chuck's diaper on the hood of the Pinto, keeping Chuck distracted by letting him gnaw on a grenade. (Which was probably just an empty casing. Probably.) Mellie stood next to him, supervising.

When she saw us, she waved and gave us a sad smile, but she pointed toward the plane, where Piper stood at the base of the steps, talking with the pilot.

In her hands, Piper held something large and flat—a display board. She had a couple of books under her arm, too. To her right, near the tail of the aircraft, the luggage compartment stood open. Ground-crew members were carefully strapping down a large wooden box with brass fixtures. A coffin.

As Meg and I walked up, the captain shook Piper's hand. His face was tight with sympathy. "Everything is in order, Ms. McLean. I'll be on board doing preflight checks until our passengers are ready."

He gave us a quick nod, then climbed into the Cessna.

Piper was dressed in faded denim jeans and a green camo tank top. She'd cut her hair in a shorter, choppier style—probably because so much had been singed off anyway—which gave her an eerie resemblance to Thalia Grace. Her multicolored eyes picked up the gray of the tarmac, so she might have been mistaken for a child of Athena.

The display board she held was, of course, Jason's diorama of Temple Hill at Camp Jupiter. Tucked under her arm were Jason's two sketchbooks.

A ball bearing lodged itself in my throat. "Ah."

"Yeah," she said. "The school let me clear out his stuff."

I took the map as one might take the folded flag of a fallen soldier. Meg slid the sketchbooks into her knapsack.

"You're off to Oklahoma?" I asked, pointing my chin toward the plane.

Piper laughed. "Well, yes. But we're driving. My dad rented an SUV. He's waiting for the Hedges and me at DK's Donuts." She smiled sadly. "First place he ever took me to breakfast when we moved out here."

"Driving?" Meg asked. "But—"

"The plane is for *you* two," Piper said. "And…Jason. Like I said, my dad had enough flight time and fuel credit for one last trip. I talked to him about sending Jason home; I mean…the home he had the longest, in the Bay Area, and how you guys could escort him up there….Dad agreed this was a much better use of the plane. We're happy to drive."

I looked at the diorama of Temple Hill—all the little Monopoly tokens carefully labeled in Jason's hand. I read the label: APOLLO. I could hear Jason's voice in my mind, saying my name, asking me for one favor: *Whatever happens, when you get back to Olympus, when you're a god again*, remember. *Remember what it's like to be human.*

This, I thought, was being human. Standing on the tarmac, watching mortals load the body of a friend and hero into the cargo hold, knowing that he would never be coming back. Saying good-bye to a grieving young woman who had done everything to help us, and knowing you could never repay her, never compensate her for all that she'd lost.

“Piper, I…” My voice seized up like the Sibyl’s.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Just get to Camp Jupiter safely. Let them give Jason the Roman burial he deserves. Stop Caligula.”

Her words weren’t bitter, as I might have expected. They were simply arid, like Palm Springs air—no judgment, just natural heat.

Meg glanced at the coffin in the cargo hold. She looked uneasy about flying with a dead companion. I couldn’t blame her. I’d never invited Hades to go sun cruising with me for good reason. Mixing the Underworld and the Overworld was bad luck.

Regardless, Meg muttered, “Thank you.”

Piper pulled the younger girl into a hug and kissed her forehead. “Don’t mention it. And if you’re ever in Tahlequah, come visit me, okay?”

I thought about the millions of young people who prayed to me every year, hoping to leave their small hometowns across the world and come here to Los Angeles, to make their huge dreams come true. Now Piper McLean was going the other way—leaving the glamour and the movie glitz of her father’s former life, going back to small-town Tahlequah, Oklahoma. And she sounded at peace with it, as if she knew her own Aeithales would be waiting there.

Mellie and Coach Hedge strolled over, Baby Chuck still happily chewing his grenade in the coach’s arms.

“Hey,” Coach said. “You about ready, Piper? Long road ahead.”

The satyr’s expression was grim and determined. He looked at the coffin in the cargo bay, then quickly fixed his eyes on the tarmac.

“Just about,” Piper agreed. “You sure the Pinto is up for such a long trip?”

“Of course!” Hedge said. “Just, uh, you know, keep in sight, in case the SUV breaks down and you need my help.”

Mellie rolled her eyes. “Chuck and I are riding in the SUV.”

The coach harrumphed. “That’s fine. It’ll give me time to play my tunes. I’ve got Bon Jovi’s entire collection on cassette!”

I tried to smile encouragingly, though I decided to give Hades a new suggestion for the Fields of Punishment if I ever saw him again: *Pinto. Road trip. Bon Jovi on cassette.*

Meg bopped Baby Chuck on the nose, which made him giggle and spit grenade shavings. “What are you guys going to do in Oklahoma?” she asked.

“Coach, of course!” said the coach. “They’ve got some great varsity sports teams in Oklahoma. Plus, I hear nature is pretty strong there. Nice place to raise a kid.”

“And there’s always work for cloud nymphs,” Mellie said. “Everybody needs clouds.”

Meg stared into the sky, maybe wondering how many of those clouds were nymphs making minimum wage. Then, suddenly, her mouth fell open.

“Uh, guys?”

She pointed north.

A gleaming shape resolved against a line of white clouds. For a moment, I thought a small plane was making its final approach. Then its wings flapped.

The ground crew scrambled into action as Festus the bronze dragon came in for a landing, Leo Valdez riding on his back.

The crew waved their orange flashlight cones, guiding Festus to a spot next to the Cessna. None of the mortals seemed to find this at all unusual. One of the crew shouted up at Leo, asking if he needed any fuel.

Leo grinned. “Nah. But if you could give my boy a wash and wax, and maybe find him some Tabasco sauce, that would be great.”

Festus roared in approval.

Leo Valdez climbed down and jogged toward us. Whatever adventures he may have had, he seemed to have come through with his curly black hair, his impish smile, and his small, elfish frame intact. He wore a purple T-shirt with gold words in Latin: MY COHORT WENT TO NEW ROME AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT.

“The party can now start!” he announced. “There’s my peeps!”

I didn’t know what to say. We all just stood there, stunned, as Leo gave us hugs.

“Man, what’s up with you guys?” he asked. “Somebody hit you with a flash grenade? So, I got good news and bad news from New Rome, but first…” He scanned our faces. He expression began to crumble. “Where’s Jason?”

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In-flight beverages
Include the tears of a god
Please have exact change

PIPER broke down. She fell against Leo and sobbed out the story until he, thunderstruck, red-eyed, hugged her back and buried his face in her neck.

The ground crew gave us space. The Hedges retreated to the Pinto, where the coach clasped Mellie and their baby tight, the way one should always do with family, knowing that tragedy could strike anyone, anytime.

Meg and I stood by, Jason's diorama still fluttering in my arms.

Next to the Cessna, Festus raised his head, made a low, keening sound, then blasted fire into the sky. The ground crew looked a little nervous about that as they hosed down his wings. I supposed private jets didn't often keen or spew fire from their nostrils, or…have nostrils.

The air around us seemed to crystallize, forming brittle shards of emotion that would cut us no matter which way we turned.

Leo looked like he'd been struck repeatedly. (And I knew. I had *seen* him struck repeatedly.) He brushed the tears from his face. He stared at the cargo hold, then at the diorama in my hands.

"I didn't…I couldn't even say good-bye," he murmured.

Piper shook her head. "Me neither. It happened so fast. He just—"

"He did what Jason always did," Leo said. "He saved the day."

Piper took a shaky breath. "What about you? Your news?"

"*My* news?" Leo choked back a sob. "After *that*, who cares about my news?"

"Hey." Piper punched his arm. "Apollo told me what you were up to. What happened at Camp Jupiter?"

Leo tapped his fingers on his thighs, as if carrying on two simultaneous conversations in Morse code. "We—we stopped this attack. Sort of. There

was a lot of damage. That's the bad news. A lot of good people…" He glanced again at the cargo hold. "Well, Frank is okay. Reyna, Hazel. That's the good news…." He shivered. "Gods. I can't even think right now. Is that normal? Like, just forgetting how to think?"

I could assure him that it was, at least in my experience.

The captain came down the steps on the plane. "Sorry, Miss McLean, but we are queued for departure. If we don't want to lose our window—"

"Yeah," Piper said. "Of course. Apollo and Meg, you guys go. I'll be fine with the coach and Mellie. Leo—"

"Oh, you're not getting rid of me," said Leo. "You just earned a bronze dragon escort to Oklahoma."

"Leo—"

"We're not arguing about this," he insisted. "Besides, it's more or less on the way back to Indianapolis."

Piper's smile was as faint as fog. "You're settling in Indianapolis. Me, in Tahlequah. We're really going places, huh?"

Leo turned to us. "Go on, you guys. Take…take Jason home. Do right by him. You'll find Camp Jupiter still there."

From the window of the plane, the last I saw of Piper and Leo, Coach and Mellie, they were huddled on the tarmac, plotting their journey east with their bronze dragon and their yellow Pinto.

Meanwhile, we taxied down the runway in our private jet. We rumbled into the sky—heading for Camp Jupiter and a rendezvous with Reyna, the daughter of Bellona.

I didn't know how I would find Tarquin's tomb, or who the soundless god was supposed to be. I didn't know how we would stop Caligula from attacking the damaged Roman camp. But none of that bothered me as much as what had happened to us already—so many lives destroyed, a hero's coffin rattling in the cargo hold, three emperors who were all still alive, ready to wreak more havoc on everyone and everything I cared about.

I found myself crying.

It was ridiculous. Gods don't cry. But as I looked at Jason's diorama in the seat next to me, all I could think about was that he would never get to see his carefully labeled plans finished. As I held my ukulele, I could only picture Crest playing his last chord with broken fingers.

"Hey." Meg turned in the seat in front of me. Despite her usual cat-eye glasses and preschool-colored outfit (somehow mended, yet again, by the magic of the ever-patient dryads), Meg sounded more grown-up today. Surer of herself. "We're going to make everything right."

I shook my head miserably. "What does that even mean? Caligula is heading north. Nero is still out there. We've faced three emperors, and defeated none of them. And Python—"

She bopped me on the nose, much harder than she had Baby Chuck.

"Ow!"

"Got your attention?"

"I—Yes."

"Then listen: *You will get to the Tiber alive. You will start to jive.* That's what the prophecy said back in Indiana, right? It will make sense once we get there. You're going to beat the Triumvirate."

I blinked. "Is that an order?"

"It's a promise."

I wished she hadn't put it that way. I could almost hear the goddess Styx laughing, her voice echoing from the cold cargo hold where the son of Jupiter now rested in his coffin.

The thought made me angry. Meg was right. I *would* defeat the emperors. I would free Delphi from Python's grasp. I would not allow those who had sacrificed themselves to do so for nothing.

Perhaps this quest had ended on a suspended fourth chord. We still had much to do.

But from now on, I would be more than Lester. I would be more than an observer.

I would be Apollo.

I would remember.

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GUIDE TO APOLLO-SPEAK

aeithales ancient Greek for *evergreen*
Aeneas a prince of Troy and reputed ancestor of the Romans; the hero of Virgil's epic the *Aeneid*
Alexander the Great a king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon from 336 to 323 BCE; he united the Greek city-states and conquered Persia
ambrosia the food of the gods; it gives immortality to whoever consumes it; demigods can eat it in small doses to heal their injuries
Aphrodite Greek goddess of love and beauty; Roman form: Venus
arbutus any shrub or tree in the heath family with white or pink flowers and red or orange berries
Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena; Roman form: Mars
Argo II a flying trireme built by the Hephaestus cabin at Camp Half-Blood to take the demigods of the Prophecy of Seven to Greece
Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Apollo
Asclepius the god of medicine; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing center of ancient Greece
Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom
Bellona a Roman goddess of war; daughter of Jupiter and Juno
blemmyae a tribe of headless people with faces in their chests
Britomartis the Greek goddess of hunting and fishing nets; her sacred animal is the griffin
cabrito roasted or stewed kid goat meat
caligae* (*caliga, sing.) Roman military boots
Caligula the nickname of the third of Rome's emperors, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, infamous for his cruelty and carnage during the four years he ruled, from 37 to 41 CE; he was assassinated by his own guard
Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located in Long Island, New York
Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located in California, between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills
Cave of Trophonius a deep chasm, home to the Oracle Trophonius
Celestial bronze a powerful magical metal used to create weapons wielded by Greek gods and their demigod children
Chicago Black Sox eight members of the Chicago White Sox, a Major League Baseball team, accused of intentionally losing the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for money
Claudius Roman emperor from 41 to 54 CE, succeeding Caligula, his nephew
Commodus Lucius Aurelius Commodus was the son of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; he became co-emperor when he was sixteen and emperor at eighteen, when his father died; he ruled from 177 to 192 CE and was megalomaniacal and corrupt; he considered himself the New Hercules and enjoyed killing animals and fighting gladiators at the Colosseum
Cyclops (Cyclopes, pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead
Daedalus a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept
Daphne a beautiful naiad who attracted Apollo's attention; she transformed into a laurel tree in order to

escape him

Delos a Greek island in the Aegean Sea near Mykonos; birthplace of Apollo

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos

denarius (denarii, pl.) a unit of Roman currency

Dionysus Greek god of wine and revelry; the son of Zeus

Doors of Death the doorway to the House of Hades, located in Tartarus; the doors have two sides—one in the mortal world, and one in the Underworld

dryad a spirit (usually female) associated with a certain tree

Edesia Roman goddess of banquets

Edsel a car produced by Ford from 1958 to 1960; it was a big flop

Elysium the paradise to which Greek heroes were sent when the gods gave them immortality

empousa a winged bloodsucking monster, daughter of the goddess Hecate

Enceladus a giant, son of Gaea and Ouranos, who was the primary adversary of the goddess Athena during the War of the Giants

Erymanthian Boar a giant wild boar that terrorized people on the island of Erymanthos until Hercules subdued it in the third of his twelve labors

Erythraean Sibyl a prophetess who presided over Apollo's Oracle at Erythrae in Ionia

Euterpe Greek goddess of lyric poetry; one of the Nine Muses; daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne

Feronia the Roman goddess of wildlife, also associated with fertility, health and abundance

Furies goddesses of vengeance

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; wife of Ouranos; mother of the Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters

Germanicus adoptee of the Roman emperor Tiberius; became a prominent general of the Roman empire, known for his successful campaigns in Germania; father of Caligula

gladius a stabbing sword; the primary weapon of Roman foot soldiers

Golden Fleece the much-coveted fleece of the gold-haired winged ram, which was held in Colchis by King Aeëtes and guarded by a dragon until Jason and the Argonauts retrieved it

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; ruler of the Underworld

Hadrian the fourteenth emperor of Rome; ruled from 117 to 138 CE; known for building a wall that marked the northern limit of Britannia

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hecate goddess of magic and crossroads

Hecuba queen of Troy, wife of King Priam, ruler during the Trojan War

Helen of Troy a daughter of Zeus and Leda and considered the most beautiful woman in the world; she sparked the Trojan War when she left her husband Menelaus for Paris, a prince of Troy

Helios the Titan god of the sun; son of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire, including volcanic, and of crafts and blacksmithing; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite; Roman form: Vulcan

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister; Apollo's stepmother

Heracles the Greek equivalent of Hercules; the son of Zeus and Alcmene; born with great strength

Hercules the Roman equivalent of Heracles; the son of Jupiter and Alcmene; born with great strength

Hermes Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication

Herophile the daughter of a water nymph; she had such a lovely singing voice that Apollo blessed her with the gift of prophecy, making her the Erythraean Sibyl

Hestia Greek goddess of the hearth and home

Hyacinthus a Greek hero and Apollo's lover, who died while trying to impress Apollo with his discus skills

hydra a many-headed water serpent

Hypnos Greek god of sleep

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Incitatus the favorite horse of Roman emperor Caligula

Janus the Roman god of beginnings, openings, doorways, gates, passages, time, and endings; depicted with two faces

Jupiter the Roman god of the sky and king of the gods; Greek form: Zeus

Katoptris Greek for *mirror*; a dagger that once belonged to Helen of Troy

khanda a double-edged straight sword; an important symbol of Sikhism

kusarigama a traditional Japanese weapon consisting of a sickle attached to a chain
Kymopoleia Greek goddess of violent storm waves; daughter of Poseidon
La Ventana a performance and event venue in Buenos Aires, Argentina
Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur
legionnaire a member of the Roman army
Leto mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood
Little Tiber the barrier of Camp Jupiter
Lucrezia Borgia the daughter of a pope and his mistress; a beautiful noblewoman who earned the reputation of being a political schemer in fifteenth-century Italy
Marcus Aurelius Roman Emperor from 161 to 180 CE; father of Commodus; considered the last of the "Five Good Emperors"
Mars the Roman god of war; Greek form: Ares
Medea a Greek enchantress, daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis and granddaughter of the Titan sun god, Helios; wife of the hero Jason, whom she helped obtain the Golden Fleece
Mefitis a goddess of foul-smelling gasses of the earth, especially worshipped in swamps and volcanic areas
Meliai Greek nymphs of the ash tree, born of Gaea; they nurtured and raised Zeus in Crete
Michelangelo an Italian sculptor, painter, architect, and poet of the High Renaissance; a towering genius in the history of Western art; among his many masterpieces, he painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican
Minotaur the part-man, part-bull son of King Minos of Crete; the Minotaur was kept in the Labyrinth, where he killed people who were sent in; he was finally defeated by Theseus
Mount Olympus home of the Twelve Olympians
Mount Vesuvius a volcano near the Bay of Naples in Italy that erupted in the year 79 CE, burying the Roman city of Pompeii under ash
Naevius Sutorius Macro a prefect of the Praetorian Guard from 31 to 38 CE, serving under the emperors Tiberius and Caligula
Neos Helios Greek for *new sun*, a title adopted by the Roman emperor Caligula
Nero ruled as Roman Emperor from 54 to 58 CE; he had his mother and his first wife put to death; many believe he was responsible for setting a fire that gutted Rome, but he blamed the Christians, whom he burned on crosses; he built an extravagant new palace on the cleared land and lost support when construction expenses forced him to raise taxes; he committed suicide
Nine Muses goddesses who grant inspiration for and protect artistic creation and expression; daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne; as children, they were taught by Apollo; their names are Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Ourania, and Calliope
Niobids children who were slain by Apollo and Artemis when their mother, Niobe, boasted about having more offspring than Leto, the twins' mother
nunchaku originally a farm tool used to harvest rice, an Okinawan weapon consisting of two sticks connected at one end by a short chain or rope
nymph a female deity who animates nature
Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo
Oracle of Trophonius a Greek who was transformed into an Oracle after his death; located at the Cave of Trophonius; known for terrifying those who seek him
Orthopolis the only child of Plemnaeus who survived birth; disguised as an old woman, Demeter nursed him, ensuring the boy's survival
Ouranos the Greek personification of the sky; husband of Gaea; father of the Titans
Palatine Hill the most famous of Rome's seven hills; considered one of the most desirable neighborhoods in ancient Rome, it was home to aristocrats and emperors
Pan the Greek god of the wild; the son of Hermes
pandai (pandos, sing.) a tribe of men with gigantic ears, eight fingers and toes, and bodies covered with hair that starts out white and turn black with age
parazonium a triangular-bladed dagger sported by women in ancient Greece
Petersburg a Civil War battle in Virginia in which an explosive charge designed to be used against the Confederates led to the deaths of 4,000 Union troops
phalanx a body of heavily armed troops in close formation
Philip of Macedon the king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedonia from 359 BCE until his

assassination in 336 BCE; father of Alexander the Great

physician's cure a concoction created by Asclepius, god of medicine, to bring someone back from the dead

Plemnaeus the father of Orthopolis, whom Demeter reared to ensure that he would flourish

Pompeii a Roman city that was destroyed in 79 CE when the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried it under ash

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and the brother of Zeus and Hades

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

praetorian guard a unit of elite Roman soldiers in the Imperial Roman Army

princeps Latin for *first citizen* or *first in line*; the early Roman emperors adopted this title for themselves, and it came to mean *prince of Rome*

Python a monstrous dragon that Gaea appointed to guard the Oracle at Delphi

River Styx the river that forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld

Sarpedon a son of Zeus who was a Lycian prince and a hero in the Trojan War; he fought with distinction on the Trojan side but was slain by the Greek warrior Patroclus

Saturnalia an ancient Roman festival held in December in honor of the god Saturn, the Roman equivalent of Kronos

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man

scimitar a saber with a curved blade

shuriken a ninja throwing star; a flat, bladed weapon used as a dagger or to distract

Sibyl a prophetess

situla Latin for *bucket*

Spartan a citizen of Sparta, or something belonging to Sparta, a city-state in ancient Greece with military dominance

strix (strixes, pl.) a large blood-drinking owl-like bird of ill omen

Stygian iron a rare magical metal capable of killing monsters

Styx a powerful water nymph; the eldest daughter of the sea Titan, Oceanus; goddess of the Underworld's most important river; goddess of hatred; the River Styx is named after her

Tarquin Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was the seventh and final king of Rome, reigning from 535 BCE until 509, when, after a popular uprising, the Roman Republic was established

Temple of Castor and Pollux an ancient temple in the Roman Forum in Rome, erected in honor of the twin demigod children of Jupiter and Leda and dedicated by the Roman general Aulus Postumius, who won a great victory at the Battle of Lake Regillus

Terpsichore Greek goddess of dance; one of the Nine Muses

Thermopylae a mountain pass near the sea in northern Greece that was the site of several battles, the most famous being between the Persians and the Greeks during the Persian invasion of 480–479 BCE

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy; Rome was founded on its banks; in ancient Rome, criminals were thrown into the river

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Ouranos, that ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

tragus (tragi, pl.) a fleshy prominence at the front of the external opening of the ear

trireme a Greek warship, having three tiers of oars on each side

triumvirate a political alliance formed by three parties

Trojan War According to legend, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta

Trophonius demigod son of Apollo, designer of Apollo's temple at Delphi, and spirit of the Dark Oracle; he decapitated his half brother Agamethus to avoid discovery after their raid on King Hyrieus's treasury

Troy a pre-Roman city situated in modern-day Turkey; site of the Trojan War

Underworld the kingdom of the dead, where souls go for eternity; ruled by Hades

ventus (venti, pl.) storm spirits

Vulcan the Roman god of fire, including volcanic, and of blacksmithing; Greek form: Hephaestus

Waystation a place of refuge for demigods, peaceful monsters, and Hunters of Artemis, located above Union Station in Indianapolis, Indiana

Zeus the Greek god of the sky and the king of the gods; Roman form: Jupiter

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COMING IN FALL 2019

4

THE TYRANT'S TOMB

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While you wait, enjoy the first book from
Rick Riordan Presents:

Aru Shah and the End of Time

by Roshani Chokshi

In Which Aru Regrets Opening the Door

The problem with growing up around highly dangerous things is that after a while you just get used to them.

For as long as she could remember, Aru had lived in the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture. And she knew full well that the lamp at the end of the Hall of the Gods was not to be touched.

She could mention "the lamp of destruction" the way a pirate who had tamed a sea monster could casually say, *Oh, you mean ole Ralph here?* But even though she was used to the lamp, she had never once lit it. That would be against the rules. The rules she went over every Saturday, when she led the afternoon visitors' tour.

Some folks may not like the idea of working on a weekend, but it never felt like work to Aru.

It felt like a ceremony.

Like a secret.

She would don her crisp scarlet vest with its three honeybee buttons. She would imitate her mother's museum-curator voice, and people—this was the best part of all—would *listen*. Their eyes never left her face. Especially when she talked about the cursed lamp.

Sometimes she thought it was the most fascinating thing she ever discussed. A cursed lamp is a much more interesting topic than, say, a visit to the dentist. Although one could argue that both are cursed.

Aru had lived at the museum for so long, it kept no secrets from her. She had grown up reading and doing her homework beneath the giant stone elephant at the entrance. Often she'd fall asleep in the theater and wake up just before the crackling self-guided tour recording announced that India

became independent from the British in 1947. She even regularly hid a stash of candy in the mouth of a four-hundred-year-old sea dragon statue (she'd named it Steve) in the west wing. Aru knew everything about everything in the museum. Except one thing…

The lamp. For the most part, it remained a mystery.

"It's not quite a lamp," her mother, renowned curator and archaeologist Dr. K. P. Shah, had told her the first time she showed it to Aru. "We call it a *diya*."

Aru remembered pressing her nose against the glass case, staring at the lump of clay. As far as cursed objects went, this was by far the most boring. It was shaped like a pinched hockey puck. Small markings, like bite marks, crimped the edges. And yet, for all its normal-ness, even the statues filling the Hall of the Gods seemed to lean away from the lamp, giving it a wide berth.

"Why can't we light it?" she had asked her mother.

Her mother hadn't met her gaze. "Sometimes light illuminates things that are better left in the dark. Besides, you never know who is watching."

Well, Aru had watched. She'd been watching her entire life.

Every day after school she would come home, hang her backpack from the stone elephant's trunk, and creep toward the Hall of the Gods.

It was the museum's most popular exhibit, filled with a hundred statues of various Hindu gods. Her mother had lined the walls with tall mirrors so visitors could see the artifacts from all angles. The mirrors were "vintage" (a word Aru had used when she traded Burton Prater a greenish penny for a whopping two dollars and half a Twix bar). Because of the tall crape myrtles and elms standing outside the windows, the light that filtered into the Hall of the Gods always looked a little muted. Feathered, almost. As if the statues were wearing crowns of light.

Aru would stand at the entrance, her gaze resting on her favorite statues—Lord Indra, the king of the heavens, wielding a thunderbolt; Lord Krishna, playing his flutes; the Buddha, sitting with his spine straight and legs folded in meditation—before her eyes would inevitably be drawn to the diya in its glass case.

She would stand there for minutes, waiting for something…anything that would make the next day at school more interesting, or make people notice that she, Aru Shah, wasn't just another seventh grader slouching through middle school, but someone *extraordinary*….

Aru was waiting for magic.

And every day she was disappointed.

"Do something," she whispered to the god statues. It was a Monday morning, and she was still in her pajamas. "You've got plenty of time to do something

awesome, because I'm on autumn break."

The statues did nothing.

Aru shrugged and looked out the window. The trees of Atlanta, Georgia, hadn't yet realized it was October. Only their top halves had taken on a scarlet-and-golden hue, as if someone had dunked them halfway in a bucket of fire and then plopped them back on the lawn.

As Aru had expected, the day was on its way to being uneventful. That should have been her first warning. The world has a tendency to trick people. It likes to make a day feel as bright and lazy as sun-warmed honey dripping down a jar as it waits until your guard is down….

And that's when it strikes.

Moments before the visitor alarm rang, Aru's mom had been gliding through the cramped two-bedroom apartment connected to the museum. She seemed to be reading three books at a time while also conversing on the phone in a language that sounded like a chorus of tiny bells. Aru, on the other hand, was lying upside down on the couch and pelting pieces of popcorn at her, trying to get her attention.

"Mom. Don't say anything if you can take me to the movies."

Her mom laughed gracefully into the phone. Aru scowled. Why couldn't *she* laugh like that? When Aru laughed, she sounded like she was choking on air.

"Mom. Don't say anything if we can get a dog. A Great Pyrenees. We can name him Beowoof!"

Now her mother was nodding with her eyes closed, which meant that she was *sincerely* paying attention. Just not to Aru.

"Mom. Don't say anything if I—"

Breeeeep!

Breeeeep!

Breeeeep!

Her mother lifted a delicate eyebrow and stared at Aru. *You know what to do*. Aru did know what to do. She just didn't want to do it.

She rolled off the couch and Spider-Man–crawled across the floor in one last bid to get her mother's attention. This was a difficult feat considering that the floor was littered with books and half-empty chai mugs. She looked back to see her mom jotting something on a notepad. Slouching, Aru opened the door and headed to the stairs.

Monday afternoons at the museum were quiet. Even Sherrilyn, the head of museum security and Aru's long-suffering babysitter on the weekends, didn't come in on Mondays. Any other day—except Sunday, when the museum was closed—Aru would help hand out visitor stickers. She would direct people to

the various exhibits and point out where the bathrooms were. Once she'd even had the opportunity to yell at someone when they'd patted the stone elephant, which had a very distinct DO NOT TOUCH sign (in Aru's mind, this applied to everyone who wasn't her).

On Mondays she had come to expect occasional visitors seeking temporary shelter from bad weather. Or people who wanted to express their concern (in the gentlest way possible) that the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture honored the devil. Or sometimes just the FedEx man needing a signature for a package.

What she did not expect when she opened the door to greet the new visitors was that they would be three students from Augustus Day School. Aru experienced one of those elevator-stopping-too-fast sensations. A low *whoosh* of panic hit her stomach as the three students stared down at her and her Spider-Man pajamas.

The first, Poppy Lopez, crossed her tan, freckled arms. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ballerina bun. The second, Burton Prater, held out his hand, where an ugly penny sat in his palm. Burton was short and pale, and his striped black-and-yellow shirt made him look like an unfortunate bumblebee. The third, Arielle Reddy—the prettiest girl in their class, with her dark brown skin and shiny black hair—simply glared.

"I knew it," said Poppy triumphantly. "You told everyone in math class that your mom was taking you to France for break."

That's what Mom had promised, Aru thought.

Last summer, Aru's mother had curled up on the couch, exhausted from another trip overseas. Right before she fell asleep, she had squeezed Aru's shoulder and said, *Perhaps I'll take you to Paris in the fall, Aru. There's a café along the Seine River where you can hear the stars come out before they dance in the night sky. We'll go to boulangeries and museums, sip coffee from tiny cups, and spend hours in the gardens.*

That night Aru had stayed awake dreaming of narrow winding streets and gardens so fancy that even their flowers looked haughty. With that promise in mind, Aru had cleaned her room and washed the dishes without complaint. And at school, the promise had become her armor. All the other students at Augustus Day School had vacation homes in places like the Maldives or Provence, and they complained when their yachts were under repair. The promise of Paris had brought Aru one tiny step closer to belonging.

Now, Aru tried not to shrink under Poppy's blue-eyed gaze. "My mom had a top secret mission with the museum. She couldn't take me."

That was partly true. Her mom never took her on work trips.

Burton threw down the green penny. "You cheated me. I gave you two bucks!"

“And you got a *vintage* penny—” started Aru.

Arielle cut her off. “We know you’re lying, Aru Shah. That’s what you are: a *liar*. And when we go back to school, we’re going to tell everyone—”

Aru’s insides squished. When she’d started at Augustus Day School last month, she’d been hopeful. But that had been short-lived.

Unlike the other students, she didn’t get driven to school in a sleek black car. She didn’t have a home “offshore.” She didn’t have a study room or a sunroom, just *a* room, and even she knew that her room was really more like a closet with delusions of grandeur.

But what she did have was imagination. Aru had been daydreaming her whole life. Every weekend, while she waited for her mom to come home, she would concoct a story: her mother was a spy, an ousted princess, a sorceress.

Her mom claimed she never wanted to go on business trips, but they were a necessity to keep the museum running. And when she came home and forgot about things—like Aru’s chess games or choir practice—it wasn’t because she didn’t care, but because she was too busy juggling the state of war and peace and art.

So at Augustus Day School, whenever the other kids asked, Aru told tales. Like the ones she told herself. She talked about cities she’d never visited and meals she’d never eaten. If she arrived with scuffed-up shoes, it was because her old pair had been sent to Italy for repair. She’d mastered that delicate condescending eyebrow everyone else had, and she deliberately mispronounced the names of stores where she bought her clothes, like the French *Tar-Jay*, and the German *Vahl-Mahrt*. If that failed, she’d just sniff and say, “Trust me, you wouldn’t recognize the brand.”

And in this way, she had fit in.

For a while, the lies had worked. She’d even been invited to spend a weekend at the lake with Poppy and Arielle. But Aru had ruined everything the day she was caught sneaking from the car-pool line. Arielle had asked which car was hers. Aru pointed at one, and Arielle’s smile turned thin. “That’s funny. Because that’s my driver’s car.”

Arielle was giving Aru that same sneer now.

“You told us you have an elephant,” said Poppy.

Aru pointed at the stone elephant behind her. “I do!”

“You said that you rescued it from India!”

“Well, Mom said it was *salvaged* from a temple, which is fancy talk for *rescue—*”

“And you said you have a cursed lamp,” said Arielle.

Aru saw the red light on Burton’s phone: steady and unblinking. He was recording her! She panicked. What if the video went online? She had two possible choices: 1) She could hope the universe might take pity on her and

allow her to burst into flames before homeroom, or 2) She could change her name, grow a beard, and move away.

Or, to avoid the situation entirely…

She could show them something impossible.

“The cursed lamp is real,” she said. “I can prove it.”

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RICK RIORDAN, dubbed “storyteller of the gods” by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Time*s #1 best-selling series. He is best known for his Percy Jackson and the Olympians books, which bring Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. He expanded on that series with two more: the Heroes of Olympus and the Trials of Apollo, which cleverly combine Greek and Roman gods and heroes with his beloved modern characters. Rick tackled the ancient Egyptian gods in the magic-filled Kane Chronicles trilogy, and Norse mythology in Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures as well as his two #1 best-selling myth collections, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods* and *Percy Jackson’s Greek Heroes*. Rick is also the publisher of an imprint at Disney Hyperion, Rick Riordan Presents, dedicated to finding other authors of highly entertaining fiction based on world cultures and mythologies. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. For more information, go to www.RickRiordan.com, or follow him on Twitter @camphalfblood.

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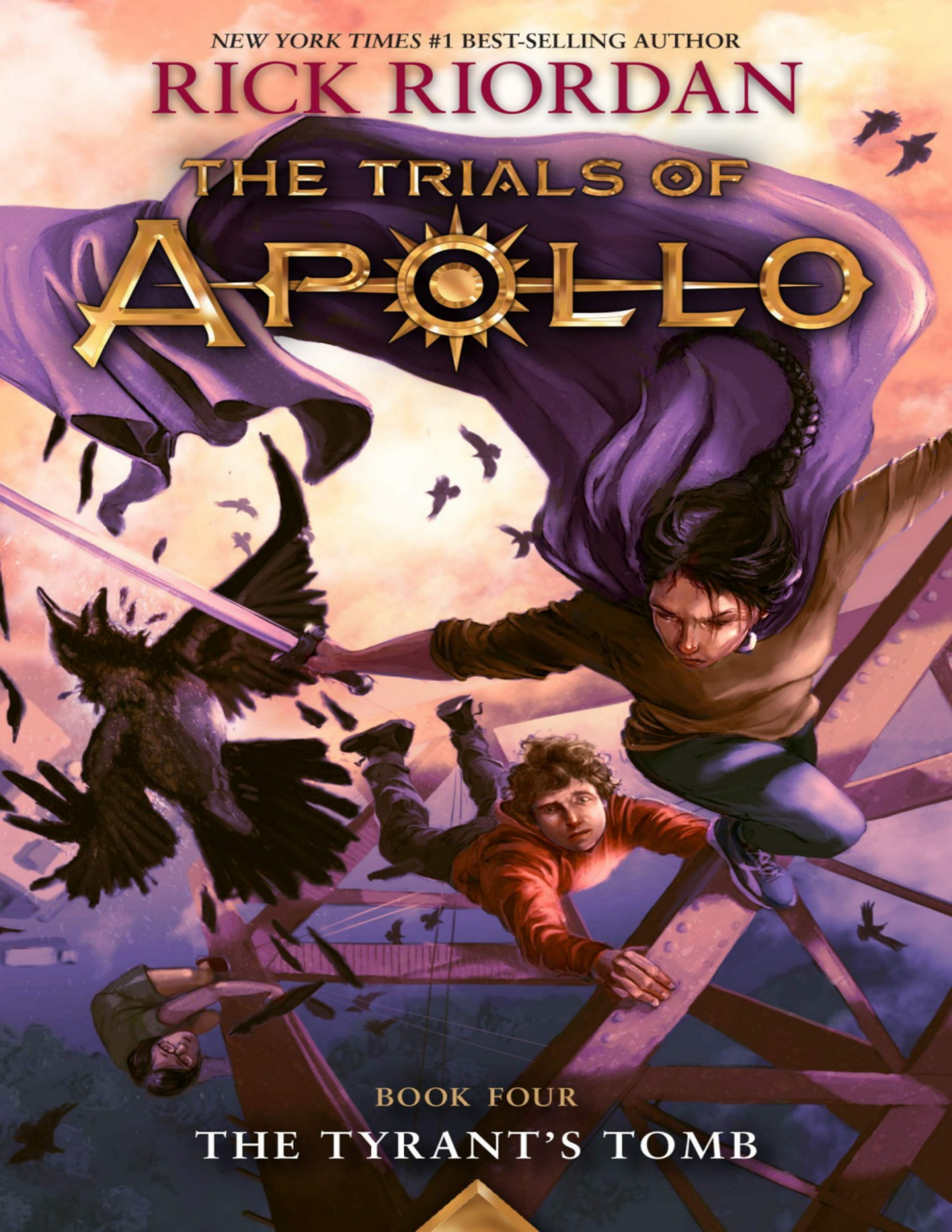
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THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

4

THE TYRANT'S TOMB

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Los Angeles New York

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In memory of Diane Martinez,
who changed many lives for the better

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Guide to Apollo Speak
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The Dark Prophecy

The words that memory wrought are set to fire,
Ere new moon rises o'er the Devil's Mount.
The changeling lord shall face a challenge dire,
Till bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.

Yet southward must the sun now trace its course,
Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death
To find the master of the swift white horse
And wrest from him the crossword speaker's breath.

To westward palace must the Lester go;
Demeter's daughter finds her ancient roots.
The cloven guide alone the way does know,
To walk the path in thine own enemy's boots.

When three are known and Tiber reached alive,
'Tis only then Apollo starts to jive.

1

There is no food here
Meg ate all the Swedish Fish
Please get off my hearse

I BELIEVE IN RETURNING dead bodies.

It seems like a simple courtesy, doesn't it? A warrior dies, you should do what you can to get their body back to their people for funerary rites. Maybe I'm old-fashioned. (I *am* over four thousand years old.) But I find it rude not to properly dispose of corpses.

Achilles during the Trojan War, for instance. *Total* pig. He chariot-dragged the body of the Trojan champion Hector around the walls of the city for days. Finally I convinced Zeus to pressure the big bully into returning Hector's body to his parents so he could have a decent burial. I mean, *come on.* Have a little respect for the people you slaughter.

Then there was Oliver Cromwell's corpse. I wasn't a fan of the man, but please. First, the English bury him with honors. Then they decide they hate him, so they dig him up and "execute" his body. Then his head falls off the pike where it's been impaled for decades and gets passed around from collector to collector for almost three centuries like a disgusting souvenir snow globe. Finally, in 1960, I whispered in the ears of some influential people, *Enough, already. I am the god Apollo, and I order you to bury that thing. You're grossing me out.*

When it came to Jason Grace, my fallen friend and half brother, I wasn't going to leave anything to chance. I would personally escort his coffin to Camp Jupiter and see him off with full honors.

That turned out to be a good call. What with the ghouls attacking us and everything.

Sunset turned San Francisco Bay into a cauldron of molten copper as our private plane landed at Oakland Airport. I say *our* private plane; the chartered trip was actually a parting gift from our friend Piper McLean and her movie star father. (Everyone should have at least one friend with a movie star parent.)

Waiting for us beside the runway was another surprise the McLeans must have arranged: a gleaming black hearse.

Meg McCaffrey and I stretched our legs on the tarmac while the ground crew somberly removed Jason's coffin from the Cessna's storage bay. The polished mahogany box seemed to glow in the evening light. Its brass fixtures glinted red. I hated how beautiful it was. Death shouldn't be beautiful.

The crew loaded it into the hearse, then transferred our luggage to the backseat. We didn't have much: Meg's backpack and mine, my bow and quiver and ukulele, and a couple of sketchbooks and a poster-board diorama we'd inherited from Jason.

I signed some paperwork, accepted the flight crew's condolences, then shook hands with a nice undertaker who handed me the keys to the hearse and walked away.

I stared at the keys, then at Meg McCaffrey, who was chewing the head off a Swedish Fish. The plane had been stocked with half a dozen tins of the squishy red candy. Not anymore. Meg had single-handedly brought the Swedish Fish ecosystem to the brink of collapse.

"I'm supposed to drive?" I wondered. "Is this a rental hearse? I'm pretty sure my New York junior driver's license doesn't cover this."

Meg shrugged. During our flight, she'd insisted on sprawling on the Cessna's sofa, so her dark pageboy haircut was flattened against the side of her head. One rhinestone-studded point of her cat-eye glasses poked through her hair like a disco shark fin.

The rest of her outfit was equally disreputable: floppy red high-tops, threadbare yellow leggings, and the well-loved knee-length green frock she'd gotten from Percy Jackson's mother. By *well-loved*, I mean the frock had been through so many battles, been washed and mended so many times, it looked less like a piece of clothing and more like a deflated hot-air

balloon. Around Meg's waist was the pièce de résistance: her multi-pocketed gardening belt, because children of Demeter never leave home without one.

"I don't have a driver's license," she said, as if I needed a reminder that my life was presently being controlled by a twelve-year-old. "I call shotgun."

"Calling shotgun" didn't seem appropriate for a hearse. Nevertheless, Meg skipped to the passenger's side and climbed in. I got behind the wheel. Soon we were out of the airport and cruising north on I-880 in our rented black grief-mobile.

Ah, the Bay Area…I'd spent some happy times here. The vast misshapen geographic bowl was jam-packed with interesting people and places. I loved the green-and-golden hills, the fog-swept coastline, the glowing lacework of bridges, and the crazy zigzag of neighborhoods shouldered up against one another like subway passengers at rush hour.

Back in the 1950s, I played with Dizzy Gillespie at Bop City in the Fillmore. During the Summer of Love, I hosted an impromptu jam session in Golden Gate Park with the Grateful Dead. (Lovely bunch of guys, but did they *really* need those fifteen-minute-long solos?) In the 1980s, I hung out in Oakland with Stan Burrell—otherwise known as MC Hammer—as he pioneered pop rap. I can't claim credit for Stan's music, but I *did* advise him on his fashion choices. Those gold lamé parachute pants? My idea. You're welcome, fashionistas.

Most of the Bay Area brought back good memories. But as I drove, I couldn't help glancing to the northwest—toward Marin County and the dark peak of Mount Tamalpais. We gods knew the place as Mount Othrys, seat of the Titans. Even though our ancient enemies had been cast down, their palace destroyed, I could still feel the evil pull of the place—like a magnet trying to extract the iron from my now-mortal blood.

I did my best to shake the feeling. We had other problems to deal with. Besides, we were going to Camp Jupiter—friendly territory on this side of the bay. I had Meg for backup. I was driving a hearse. What could possibly go wrong?

The Nimitz Freeway snaked through the East Bay flatlands, past warehouses and docklands, strip malls and rows of dilapidated bungalows. To our right rose downtown Oakland, its small cluster of high-rises facing off against its cooler neighbor San Francisco across the bay as if to proclaim, *We are Oakland! We exist, too!*

Meg reclined in her seat, propped her red high-tops up on the dashboard, and cracked open her window.

“I like this place,” she decided.

“We just got here,” I said. “What is it you like? The abandoned warehouses? That sign for Bo’s Chicken ’N’ Waffles?”

“Nature.”

“Concrete counts as nature?”

“There’s trees, too. Plants flowering. Moisture in the air. The eucalyptus smells good. It’s not like…”

She didn’t need to finish her sentence. Our time in Southern California had been marked by scorching temperatures, extreme drought, and raging wildfires—all thanks to the magical Burning Maze controlled by Caligula and his hate-crazed sorceress bestie, Medea. The Bay Area wasn’t experiencing any of those problems. Not at the moment, anyway.

We’d killed Medea. We’d extinguished the Burning Maze. We’d freed the Erythraean Sibyl and brought relief to the mortals and withering nature spirits of Southern California.

But Caligula was still very much alive. He and his co-emperors in the Triumvirate were still intent on controlling all means of prophecy, taking over the world, and writing the future in their own sadistic image. Right now, Caligula’s fleet of evil luxury yachts was making its way toward San Francisco to attack Camp Jupiter. I could only imagine what sort of hellish destruction the emperor would rain down on Oakland and Bo’s Chicken ’N’ Waffles.

Even if we somehow managed to defeat the Triumvirate, there was still that greatest Oracle, Delphi, under the control of my old nemesis Python. How I could defeat him in my present form as a sixteen-year-old weakling, I had no idea.

But, hey. Except for that, everything was fine. The eucalyptus smelled nice.

Traffic slowed at the I-580 interchange. Apparently, California drivers didn’t follow that custom of yielding to hearses out of respect. Perhaps they figured at least one of our passengers was already dead, so we weren’t in a hurry.

Meg toyed with her window control, raising and lowering the glass. *Reeee. Reeee. Reeee.*

“You know how to get to Camp Jupiter?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“ ’Cause you said that about Camp Half-Blood.”

“We got there! Eventually.”

“Frozen and half-dead.”

“Look, the entrance to camp is right over there.” I waved vaguely at the Oakland Hills. “There’s a secret passage in the Caldecott Tunnel or something.”

“Or something?”

“Well, I haven’t actually ever *driven* to Camp Jupiter,” I admitted. “Usually I descend from the heavens in my glorious sun chariot. But I know the Caldecott Tunnel is the main entrance. There’s probably a sign. Perhaps a *demigods only* lane.”

Meg peered at me over the top of her glasses. “You’re the dumbest god ever.” She raised her window with a final *reeee SHLOOMP!*—a sound that reminded me uncomfortably of a guillotine blade.

We turned northeast onto Highway 24. The congestion eased as the hills loomed closer. The elevated lanes soared past neighborhoods of winding streets and tall conifers, white stucco houses clinging to the sides of grassy ravines.

A road sign promised CALDECOTT TUNNEL ENTRANCE, 2 MI. That should have comforted me. Soon, we’d pass through the borders of Camp Jupiter into a heavily guarded, magically camouflaged valley where an entire Roman legion could shield me from my worries, at least for a while.

Why, then, were the hairs on the back of my neck quivering like sea worms?

Something was wrong. It dawned on me that the uneasiness I’d felt since we landed might not be the distant threat of Caligula, or the old Titan base on Mount Tamalpais, but something more immediate…something malevolent, and getting closer.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Through the back window’s gauzy curtains, I saw nothing but traffic. But then, in the polished surface of Jason’s coffin lid, I caught the reflection of movement from a dark shape outside—as if a human-size object had just flown past the hearse.

“Oh, Meg?” I tried to keep my voice even. “Do you see anything unusual behind us?”

“Unusual like what?”

THUMP.

The hearse lurched as if we'd been hitched to a trailer full of scrap metal. Above my head, two foot-shaped impressions appeared in the upholstered ceiling.

"Something just landed on the roof," Meg deduced.

"Thank you, Sherlock McCaffrey! Can you get it off?"

"Me? How?"

That was an annoyingly fair question. Meg could turn the rings on her middle fingers into wicked gold swords, but if she summoned them in close quarters, like the interior of the hearse, she a) wouldn't have room to wield them, and b) might end up impaling me and/or herself.

CREAK. CREAK. The footprint impressions deepened as the thing adjusted its weight like a surfer on a board. It must have been immensely heavy to sink into the metal roof.

A whimper bubbled in my throat. My hands trembled on the steering wheel. I yearned for my bow and quiver in the backseat, but I couldn't have used them. DWSPW, driving while shooting projectile weapons, is a big no-no, kids.

"Maybe you can open the window," I said to Meg. "Lean out and tell it to go away."

"Um, no." (Gods, she was stubborn.) "What if you try to shake it off?"

Before I could explain that this was a terrible idea while traveling fifty miles an hour on a highway, I heard a sound like a pop-top aluminum can opening—the crisp, pneumatic hiss of air through metal. A claw punctured the ceiling—a grimy white talon the size of a drill bit. Then another. And another. And another, until the upholstery was studded with ten pointy white spikes—just the right number for two very large hands.

"Meg?" I yelped. "Could you—?"

I don't know how I might have finished that sentence. *Protect me? Kill that thing? Check in the back to see if I have any spare undies?*

I was rudely interrupted by the creature ripping open our roof like we were a birthday present.

Staring down at me through the ragged hole was a withered, ghoulish humanoid, its blue-black hide glistening like the skin of a housefly, its eyes filmy white orbs, its bared teeth dripping saliva. Around its torso fluttered a loincloth of greasy black feathers. The smell coming off it was more putrid than any dumpster—and believe me, I'd fallen into a few.

"FOOD!" it howled.

“Kill it!” I yelled at Meg.

“Swerve!” she countered.

One of the many annoying things about being incarcerated in my puny mortal body: I was Meg McCaffrey’s servant. I was bound to obey her direct commands. So when she yelled “Swerve,” I yanked the steering wheel hard to the right. The hearse handled beautifully. It careened across three lanes of traffic, barreled straight through the guardrail, and plummeted into the canyon below.

2

Dude, this isn't cool
Dude just tried to eat my dude
That's my dead dude, dude

I LIKE FLYING CARS. I prefer it when the car is actually capable of flight, however.

As the hearse achieved zero gravity, I had a few microseconds to appreciate the scenery below—a lovely little lake edged with eucalyptus trees and walking trails, and a small beach on the far shore, where a cluster of evening picnickers relaxed on blankets.

Oh, good, some small part of my brain thought. *Maybe we'll at least land in the water.*

Then we dropped—not toward the lake, but toward the trees.

A sound like Luciano Pavarotti's high C in *Don Giovanni* issued from my throat. My hands glued themselves to the wheel.

As we plunged into the eucalypti, the ghoul disappeared from our roof—almost as if the tree branches had purposefully swatted it away. Other branches seemed to bend around the hearse, slowing our fall, dropping us from one leafy cough-drop-scented bough to another until we hit the ground on all four wheels with a jarring *thud*. Too late to do any good, the air bags deployed, shoving my head against the backrest.

Yellow amoebas danced in my eyes. The taste of blood stung my throat. I clawed for the door handle, squeezed my way out between the air bag and the seat, and tumbled onto a bed of cool soft grass.

"Blergh," I said.

I heard Meg retching somewhere nearby. At least that meant she was still alive. About ten feet to my left, water lapped at the shore of the lake. Directly above me, near the top of the largest eucalyptus tree, our ghoulish blue-black friend was snarling and writhing, trapped in a cage of branches.

I struggled to sit up. My nose throbbed. My sinuses felt like they were packed with menthol rub. “Meg?”

She staggered into view around the front of the hearse. Ring-shaped bruises were forming around her eyes—no doubt courtesy of the passenger-side air bag. Her glasses were intact but askew. “You suck at swerving.”

“Oh, my gods!” I protested. “You *ordered* me to—” My brain faltered. “Wait. How are we alive? Was that *you* who bent the tree branches?”

“Duh.” She flicked her hands, and her twin golden *sica* blades flashed into existence. Meg used them like ski poles to steady herself. “They won’t hold that monster much longer. Get ready.”

“What?” I yelped. “Wait. No. Not ready!”

I pulled myself to my feet with the driver’s-side door.

Across the lake, the picnickers had risen from their blankets. I suppose a hearse falling from the sky had gotten their attention. My vision was blurry, but something seemed odd about the group…. Was one of them wearing armor? Did another have goat legs?

Even if they were friendly, they were much too far away to help.

I limped to the hearse and yanked open the backseat door. Jason’s coffin appeared safe and secure in the rear bay. I grabbed my bow and quiver. My ukulele had vanished somewhere under the backseat. I would have to do without it.

Above, the creature howled, thrashing in its branch cage.

Meg stumbled. Her forehead was beaded with sweat. Then the ghoul broke free and hurtled downward, landing only a few yards away. I hoped the creature’s legs might break on impact, but no such luck. It took a few steps, its feet punching wet craters in the grass, before it straightened and snarled, its pointy white teeth like tiny mirror-image picket fences.

“KILL AND EAT!” it screamed.

What a lovely singing voice. The ghoul could’ve fronted any number of Norwegian death metal groups.

“Wait!” My voice was shrill. “I—I know you.” I wagged my finger, as if that might crank-start my memory. Clutched in my other hand, my bow shook. The arrows rattled in my quiver. “H-hold on, it’ll come to me!”

The ghoul hesitated. I've always believed that most sentient creatures like to be recognized. Whether we are gods, people, or slavering ghouls in vulture-feather loincloths, we enjoy others knowing who we are, speaking our names, appreciating that we exist.

Of course, I was just trying to buy time. I hoped Meg would catch her breath, charge the creature, and slice it into putrid-ghoul pappardelle. At the moment, though, it didn't seem that she was capable of using her swords for anything but crutches. I supposed controlling gigantic trees could be tiring, but honestly, couldn't she have waited to run out of steam until *after* she killed Vulture Diaper?

Wait. Vulture Diaper…I took another look at the ghoul: its strange mottled blue-and-black hide, its milky eyes, its oversize mouth and tiny nostril slits. It smelled of rancid meat. It wore the feathers of a carrion eater….

"I *do* know you," I realized. "You're a *eurynomos*."

I dare you to try saying *You're a eurynomos* when your tongue is leaden, your body is shaking from terror, and you've just been punched in the face by a hearse's air bag.

The ghoul's lips curled. Silvery strands of saliva dripped from its chin. "YES! FOOD SAID MY NAME!"

"B-but you're a corpse-eater!" I protested. "You're supposed to be in the Underworld, working for Hades!"

The ghoul tilted its head as if trying to remember the words *Underworld* and *Hades.* It didn't seem to like them as much as *kill* and *eat.*

"HADES GAVE ME OLD DEAD!" it shouted. "THE MASTER GIVES ME FRESH!"

"The master?"

"THE MASTER!"

I really wished Vulture Diaper wouldn't scream. It didn't have any visible ears, so perhaps it had poor volume control. Or maybe it just wanted to spray that gross saliva over as large a radius as possible.

"If you mean Caligula," I ventured, "I'm sure he's made you all sorts of promises, but I can tell you, Caligula is *not*—"

"HA! STUPID FOOD! CALIGULA IS NOT THE MASTER!"

"Not the master?"

"NOT THE MASTER!"

"MEG!" I shouted. Ugh. Now *I* was doing it.

“Yeah?” Meg wheezed. She looked fierce and warlike as she granny-walked toward me with her sword-crutches. “Gimme. Minute.”

It was clear she would not be taking the lead in this particular fight. If I let Vulture Diaper anywhere near her, it would kill her, and I found that idea 95 percent unacceptable.

“Well, eurynomos,” I said, “whoever your master is, you’re not killing and eating anyone today!”

I whipped an arrow from my quiver. I nocked it in my bow and took aim, as I had done literally millions of times before—but it wasn’t quite as impressive with my hands shaking and my knees wobbling.

Why do mortals tremble when they’re scared, anyway? It seems so counterproductive. If *I* had created humans, I would have given them steely determination and superhuman strength during moments of terror.

The ghoul hissed, spraying more spit.

“SOON THE MASTER’S ARMIES WILL RISE AGAIN!” it bellowed. “WE WILL FINISH THE JOB! I WILL SHRED FOOD TO THE BONE, AND FOOD WILL JOIN US!”

Food will join us? My stomach experienced a sudden loss of cabin pressure. I remembered why Hades loved these eurynomoi so much. The slightest cut from their claws caused a wasting disease in mortals. And when those mortals died, they rose again as what the Greeks called *vrykolakai*—or, in TV parlance, zombies.

That wasn’t the worst of it. If a eurynomos managed to devour the flesh from a corpse, right down to the bones, that skeleton would reanimate as the fiercest, toughest kind of undead warrior. Many of them served as Hades’s elite palace guards, which was a job I did *not* want to apply for.

“Meg?” I kept my arrow trained on the ghoul’s chest. “Back away. Do not let this thing scratch you.”

“But—”

“Please,” I begged. “For once, trust me.”

Vulture Diaper growled. “FOOD TALKS TOO MUCH! HUNGRY!”

It charged me.

I shot.

The arrow found its mark—the middle of the ghoul’s chest—but it bounced off like a rubber mallet against metal. The Celestial bronze point must have hurt, at least. The ghoul yelped and stopped in its tracks, a steaming, puckered wound on its sternum. But the monster was still very

much alive. Perhaps if I managed twenty or thirty shots at that exact same spot, I could do some real damage.

With trembling hands, I nocked another arrow. “Th-that was just a warning!” I bluffed. “The next one will kill!”

Vulture Diaper made a gurgling noise deep in its throat. I hoped it was a delayed death rattle. Then I realized it was only laughing. “WANT ME TO EAT DIFFERENT FOOD FIRST? SAVE YOU FOR DESSERT?”

It uncurled its claws, gesturing toward the hearse.

I didn’t understand. I refused to understand. Did it want to eat the air bags? The upholstery?

Meg got it before I did. She screamed in rage.

The creature was an eater of the dead. We were driving a hearse.

“NO!” Meg shouted. “Leave him alone!”

She lumbered forward, raising her swords, but she was in no shape to face the ghoul. I shouldered her aside, putting myself between her and the eurynomos, and fired my arrows again and again.

They sparked off the monster’s blue-black hide, leaving steaming, annoyingly nonlethal wounds. Vulture Diaper staggered toward me, snarling in pain, its body twitching from the impact of each hit.

It was five feet away.

Two feet away, its claws splayed to shred my face.

Somewhere behind me, a female voice shouted, “HEY!”

The sound distracted Vulture Diaper just long enough for me to fall courageously on my butt. I scrambled away from the ghoul’s claws.

Vulture Diaper blinked, confused by its new audience. About ten feet away, a ragtag assortment of fauns and dryads, perhaps a dozen total, were all attempting to hide behind one gangly pink-haired young woman in Roman legionnaire armor.

The girl fumbled with some sort of projectile weapon. Oh, dear. A *manubalista*. A Roman heavy crossbow. Those things were *awful.* Slow. Powerful. Notoriously unreliable. The bolt was set. She cranked the handle, her hands shaking as badly as mine.

Meanwhile, to my left, Meg groaned in the grass, trying to get back on her feet. “You *pushed* me,” she complained, by which I’m sure she meant *Thank you, Apollo, for saving my life.*

The pink-haired girl raised her manubalista. With her long, wobbly legs, she reminded me of a baby giraffe. “G-get away from them,” she ordered the

ghoul.

Vulture Diaper treated her to its trademark hissing and spitting. “MORE FOOD! YOU WILL ALL JOIN THE KING’S DEAD!”

“Dude.” One of the fauns nervously scratched his belly under his PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF BERKELEY T-shirt. “That’s not cool.”

“Not cool,” several of his friends echoed.

“YOU CANNOT OPPOSE ME, ROMAN!” the ghoul snarled. “I HAVE ALREADY TASTED THE FLESH OF YOUR COMRADES! AT THE BLOOD MOON, YOU WILL JOIN THEM—”

THWUNK.

An Imperial gold crossbow bolt materialized in the center of Vulture Diaper’s chest. The ghoul’s milky eyes widened in surprise. The Roman legionnaire looked just as stunned.

“Dude, you hit it,” said one of the fauns, as if this offended his sensibilities.

The ghoul crumbled into dust and vulture feathers. The bolt clunked to the ground.

Meg limped to my side. “See? *That’s* how you’re supposed to kill it.”

“Oh, shut up,” I grumbled.

We faced our unlikely savior.

The pink-haired girl frowned at the pile of dust, her chin quivering as if she might cry. She muttered, “I *hate* those things.”

“Y-you’ve fought them before?” I asked.

She looked at me like this was an insultingly stupid question.

One of the fauns nudged her. “Lavinia, dude, ask who these guys are.”

“Um, right.” Lavinia cleared her throat. “Who are you?”

I struggled to my feet, trying to regain some composure. “I am Apollo. This is Meg. Thank you for saving us.”

Lavinia stared. “Apollo, as in—”

“It’s a long story. We’re transporting the body of our friend, Jason Grace, to Camp Jupiter for burial. Can you help us?”

Lavinia’s mouth hung open. “Jason Grace…is dead?”

Before I could answer, from somewhere across Highway 24 came a wail of rage and anguish.

“Um, hey,” said one of the fauns, “don’t those ghoul things usually hunt in pairs?”

Lavinia gulped. “Yeah. Let’s get you guys to camp. Then we can talk about”—she gestured uneasily at the hearse—“who is dead, and why.”

3

I cannot chew gum
And run with a coffin at
The same time. Sue me.

HOW MANY NATURE SPIRITS does it take to carry a coffin?

The answer is unknowable, since all the dryads and fauns except one scattered into the trees as soon as they realized work was involved. The last faun would have deserted us, too, but Lavinia grabbed his wrist.

"Oh, no, you don't, Don."

Behind his round rainbow-tinted glasses, Don the faun's eyes looked panicked. His goatee twitched—a facial tic that made me nostalgic for Grover the satyr.

(In case you're wondering, fauns and satyrs are virtually the same. Fauns are simply the Roman version, and they're not quite as good at…well, anything, really.)

"Hey, I'd love to help," Don said. "It's just I remembered this appointment—"

"Fauns don't make appointments," Lavinia said.

"I double-parked my car—"

"You don't have a car."

"I need to feed my dog—"

"Don!" Lavinia snapped. "You *owe* me."

"Okay, okay." Don tugged his wrist free and rubbed it, his expression aggrieved. "Look, just because I said Poison Oak *might* be at the picnic doesn't mean, you know, I *promised* she would be."

Lavinia's face turned terra-cotta red. "That's not what I meant! I've covered for you, like, a thousand times. Now you need to help me with *this*."

She gestured vaguely at me, the hearse, the world in general. I wondered if Lavinia was new to Camp Jupiter. She seemed uncomfortable in her legionnaire armor. She kept shrugging her shoulders, bending her knees, tugging at the silver Star of David pendant that hung from her long, slender neck. Her soft brown eyes and tuft of pink hair only accentuated my first impression of her—a baby giraffe that had wobbled away from her mother for the first time and was now examining the savannah as if thinking, *Why am I here?*

Meg stumbled up next to me. She grabbed my quiver for balance, garroting me with its strap in the process. "Who's Poison Oak?"

"Meg," I chided, "that's none of our business. But if I had to guess, I'd say Poison Oak is a dryad whom Lavinia here is interested in, just like you were interested in Joshua back at Palm Springs."

Meg barked, "I was *not* interested—"

Lavinia chorused, "I am *not* interested—"

Both girls fell silent, scowling at each other.

"Besides," Meg said, "isn't Poison Oak…like, poisonous?"

Lavinia splayed her fingers to the sky as if thinking, *Not that question again*. "Poison Oak is gorgeous! Which is not to say I'd definitely go out with her—"

Don snorted. "Whatever, dude."

Lavinia glared crossbow bolts at the faun. "But I'd *think* about it—if there was chemistry or whatever. Which is why I was willing to sneak away from my patrol for this *picnic*, where Don assured me—"

"Whoa, hey!" Don laughed nervously. "Aren't we supposed to be getting these guys to camp? How about that hearse? Does it still run?"

I take back what I said about fauns not being good at anything. Don was quite adept at changing the subject.

Upon closer inspection, I saw how badly damaged the hearse was. Aside from numerous eucalyptus-scented dents and scratches, the front end had crumpled going through the guardrail. It now resembled Flaco Jiménez's accordion after I took a baseball bat to it. (Sorry, Flaco, but you played so well I got jealous, and the accordion had to die.)

"We can carry the coffin," Lavinia suggested. "The four of us."

Another angry screech cut through the evening air. It sounded closer this time—somewhere just north of the highway.

"We'll never make it," I said, "not climbing all the way back up to the Caldecott Tunnel."

"There's another way," Lavinia said. "Secret entrance to camp. A lot closer."

"I like close," Meg said.

"Thing is," said Lavinia, "I'm supposed to be on guard duty right now. My shift is about to end. I'm not sure how long my partner can cover for me. So when we get to the camp, let me do the talking about where and how we met."

Don shuddered. "If anyone finds out Lavinia skipped sentry duty again __"

"Again?" I asked.

"Shut up, Don," Lavinia said.

On one hand, Lavinia's troubles seemed trivial compared to, say, dying and getting eaten by a ghoul. On the other hand, I knew that Roman-legion punishments could be harsh. They often involved whips, chains, and rabid live animals, much like an Ozzy Osbourne concert circa 1980.

"You must really like this Poison Oak," I decided.

Lavinia grunted. She scooped up her manubalista bolt and shook it at me threateningly. "I help you, you help me. That's the deal."

Meg spoke for me: "Deal. How fast can we run with a coffin?"

Not very fast, as it turned out.

After grabbing the rest of our things from the hearse, Meg and I took the back end of Jason's coffin. Lavinia and Don took the front. We did a clumsy pallbearer jog along the shoreline, me glancing nervously at the treetops, hoping no more ghouls would rain from the sky.

Lavinia promised us that the secret entrance was just across the lake. The problem was, it was *across the lake*, which meant that, not being able to pall-bear on water, we had to lug Jason's casket roughly a quarter mile around the shore.

"Oh, come on," Lavinia said when I complained. "We ran over here from the beach to help you guys. The least you can do is run back with us."

"Yes," I said, "but this coffin is heavy."

"I'm with him," Don agreed.

Lavinia snorted. “You guys should try marching twenty miles in full legionnaire gear.”

“No, thanks,” I muttered.

Meg said nothing. Despite her drained complexion and labored breathing, she shouldered her side of the coffin without complaint—probably just to make me feel bad.

Finally we reached the picnic beach. A sign at the trailhead read:

LAKE TEMESCAL
SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK

Typical of mortals: they warn you about drowning, but not about flesh-devouring ghouls.

Lavinia marched us to a small stone building that offered restrooms and a changing area. On the exterior back wall, half-hidden behind blackberry bushes, stood a nondescript metal door, which Lavinia kicked open. Inside, a concrete shaft sloped down into the darkness.

“I suppose the mortals don’t know about this,” I guessed.

Don giggled. “Nah, dude, they think it’s a generator room or something. Even most of the legionnaires don’t know about it. Only the cool ones like Lavinia.”

“You’re not getting out of helping, Don,” said Lavinia. “Let’s set down the coffin for a second.”

I said a silent prayer of thanks. My shoulders ached. My back was slick with sweat. I was reminded of the time Hera made me lug a solid-gold throne around her Olympian living room until she found exactly the right spot for it. Ugh, that goddess.

Lavinia pulled a pack of bubble gum from the pocket of her jeans. She stuffed three pieces in her mouth, then offered some to me and Meg.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“Sure,” said Meg.

“Sure!” said Don.

Lavinia jerked the bubble gum pack out of his reach. “Don, you know bubble gum doesn’t agree with you. Last time, you were hugging the toilet for days.”

Don pouted. “But it *tastes* good.”

Lavinia peered into the tunnel, her jaw working furiously at the gum. “It’s too narrow to carry the coffin with four people. I’ll lead the way. Don,

you and Apollo”—she frowned as if she still couldn’t believe that was my name—“each take one end.”

“Just the two of us?” I protested.

“What he said!” Don agreed.

“Just carry it like a sofa,” said Lavinia, as if that was supposed to mean something to me. “And you—what’s your name? Peg?”

“Meg,” said Meg.

“Is there anything you don’t need to bring?” asked Lavinia. “Like…that poster-board thing under your arm—is that a school project?”

Meg must have been incredibly tired, because she didn’t scowl or hit Lavinia or cause geraniums to grow out of her ears. She just turned sideways, shielding Jason’s diorama with her body. “No. This is important.”

“Okay.” Lavinia scratched her eyebrow, which, like her hair, was frosted pink. “Just stay in back, I guess. Guard our retreat. This door can’t be locked, which means—”

As if on cue, from the far side of the lake came the loudest howl yet, filled with rage, as if the ghoul had discovered the dust and vulture diaper of its fallen comrade.

“Let’s go!” Lavinia said.

I began to revise my impression of our pink-haired friend. For a skittish baby giraffe, she could be *very* bossy.

We descended single-file into the passage, me carrying the back of the coffin, Don the front.

Lavinia’s gum scented the stale air, so the tunnel smelled like moldy cotton candy. Every time Lavinia or Meg popped a bubble, I flinched. My fingers quickly began to ache from the weight of the casket.

“How much farther?” I asked.

“We’re barely inside the tunnel,” Lavinia said.

“So…not far, then?”

“Maybe a quarter mile.”

I tried for a grunt of manly endurance. It came out as more of a snivel.

“Guys,” Meg said behind me, “we need to move faster.”

“You see something?” Don asked.

“Not yet,” Meg said. “Just a feeling.”

Feelings. I hated those.

Our weapons provided the only light. The gold fittings of the manubalista slung across Lavinia’s back cast a ghostly halo around her pink

hair. The glow of Meg's swords threw our elongated shadows across either wall, so we seemed to be walking in the midst of a spectral crowd. Whenever Don looked over his shoulder, his rainbow-tinted lenses seemed to float in the dark like patches of oil on water.

My hands and forearms burned from strain, but Don didn't seem to be having any trouble. I was determined not to weep for mercy before the faun did.

The path widened and leveled out. I chose to take that as a good sign, though neither Meg nor Lavinia offered to help carry the casket.

Finally, my hands couldn't take any more. "Stop."

Don and I managed to set down Jason's coffin a moment before I would've dropped it. Deep red gouges marred my fingers. Blisters were beginning to form on my palms. I felt like I'd just played a nine-hour set of dueling jazz guitar with Pat Metheny, using a six-hundred-pound iron Fender Stratocaster.

"Ow," I muttered, because I was once the god of poetry and have great descriptive powers.

"We can't rest long," Lavinia warned. "My sentry shift must have ended by now. My partner's probably wondering where I am."

I almost wanted to laugh. I'd forgotten we were supposed to be worried about Lavinia playing hooky along with all our other problems. "Will your partner report you?"

Lavinia stared into the dark. "Not unless she has to. She's my centurion, but she's cool."

"Your *centurion* gave you permission to sneak off?" I asked.

"Not exactly." Lavinia tugged at her Star of David pendant. "She just kinda turned a blind eye, you know? She gets it."

Don chuckled. "You mean having a crush on someone?"

"No!" Lavinia said. "Like, just *standing* on guard duty for five hours straight. Ugh. I can't do it! Especially after all that's happened recently."

I considered the way Lavinia fiddled with her necklace, viciously chewed her bubble gum, wobbled constantly about on her gangly legs. Most demigods have some form of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. They are hardwired to be in constant movement, jumping from battle to battle. But Lavinia definitely put the *H* in *ADHD*.

"When you say 'all that's happened recently…'" I prompted, but before I could finish the question, Don's posture stiffened. His nose and goatee

quivered. I'd spent enough time in the Labyrinth with Grover Underwood to know what that meant.

"What do you smell?" I demanded.

"Not sure…" He sniffed. "It's close. And funky."

"Oh." I blushed. "I did shower this morning, but when I exert myself, this mortal body sweats—"

"It's not that. Listen!"

Meg faced the direction we'd come. She raised her swords and waited. Lavinia unslung her manubalista and peered into the shadows ahead of us.

Finally, over the pounding of my own heartbeat, I heard the clink of metal and the echo of footsteps on stone. Someone was running toward us.

"They're coming," Meg said.

"No, wait," said Lavinia. "It's her!"

I got the feeling Meg and Lavinia were talking about two different things, and I wasn't sure I liked either one.

"Her who?" I demanded.

"Them where?" Don squeaked.

Lavinia raised her hand and shouted, "I'm here!"

"Shhhh!" Meg said, still facing the way we'd come. "Lavinia, what are you *doing*?"

Then, from the direction of Camp Jupiter, a young woman jogged into our circle of light.

She was about Lavinia's age, maybe fourteen or fifteen, with dark skin and amber eyes. Curly brown hair fell around her shoulders. Her legionnaire greaves and breastplate glinted over jeans and a purple T-shirt. Affixed to her breastplate was the insignia of a centurion, and strapped to her side was a *spatha*—a cavalry sword. Ah, yes…I recognized her from the crew of the *Argo II*.

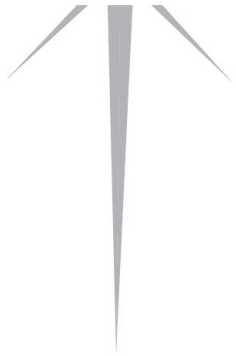
"Hazel Levesque," I said. "Thank the gods."

Hazel stopped in her tracks, no doubt wondering who I was, how I knew her, and why I was grinning like a fool. She glanced at Don, then Meg, then the coffin. "Lavinia, what's going on?"

"Guys," Meg interrupted. "We have company."

She did not mean Hazel. Behind us, at the edge of the light from Meg's swords, a dark form prowled, its blue-black skin glistening, its teeth dripping saliva. Then another, identical ghoul emerged from the gloom behind it.

Just our luck. The eurynomoi were having a *kill one, get two free* special.



4

Ukulele song?
No need to remove my guts
A simple "no" works

"OH," DON SAID IN a small voice. "*That's* what smells."

"I thought you said they travel in pairs," I complained.

"Or threes," the faun whimpered. "Sometimes in threes."

The eurynomoi snarled, crouching just out of reach of Meg's blades. Behind me, Lavinia hand-cranked her manubalista—*click, click, click*—but the weapon was so slow to prime, she wouldn't be ready to fire until sometime next Thursday. Hazel's spatha rasped as she slid the blade from its scabbard. That, too, wasn't a great weapon for fighting in close quarters.

Meg seemed unsure whether she should charge, stand her ground, or drop from exhaustion. Bless her stubborn little heart, she still had Jason's diorama wedged under her arm, which would not help her in battle.

I fumbled for a weapon and came up with my ukulele. Why not? It was only slightly more ridiculous than a spatha or a manubalista.

My nose might have been busted from the hearse's air bag, but my sense of smell was sadly unaffected. The combination of ghoul stench with the scent of bubble gum made my nostrils burn and my eyes water.

"FOOD," said the first ghoul.

"FOOD!" agreed the second.

They sounded delighted, as if we were favorite meals they hadn't been served in ages.

Hazel spoke, calm and steady. “Guys, we fought these things in the battle. Don’t let them scratch you.”

The way she said *the battle* made it sound like there could only be one horrible event to which she might be referring. I flashed back to what Leo Valdez had told us in Los Angeles—that Camp Jupiter had suffered major damage, lost good people in their last fight. I was beginning to appreciate how bad it must have been.

“No scratches,” I agreed. “Meg, hold them at bay. I’m going to try a song.”

My idea was simple: strum a sleepy tune, lull the creatures into a stupor, then kill them in a leisurely, civilized fashion.

I underestimated the eurynomoi’s hatred of ukuleles. As soon as I announced my intentions, they howled and charged.

I shuffled backward, sitting down hard on Jason’s coffin. Don shrieked and cowered. Lavinia kept cranking her manubalista. Hazel yelled, “Make a hole!” Which in the moment made no sense to me.

Meg burst into action, slicing an arm off one ghoul, swiping at the legs of the other, but her movements were sluggish, and with the diorama under one arm, she could only use a single sword effectively. If the ghouls had been interested in killing her, she would’ve been overwhelmed. Instead, they shoved past her, intent on stopping me before I could strum a chord.

Everyone is a music critic.

“FOOD!” screamed the one-armed ghoul, lunging at me with its five remaining claws.

I tried to suck in my gut. I really did.

But, oh, cursed flab! If I had been in my godly form, the ghoul’s claws never would have connected. My hammered-bronze abs would have scoffed at the monster’s attempt to reach them. Alas, Lester’s body failed me yet again.

The eurynomos raked its hand across my midsection, just below my ukulele. The tip of its middle finger—barely, just barely—found flesh. Its claw sliced through my shirt and across my belly like a dull razor.

I tumbled sideways off Jason’s coffin, warm blood trickling into the waistline of my pants.

Hazel Levesque yelled in defiance. She vaulted over the coffin and drove her spatha straight through the eurynomos’s clavicle, creating the world’s first ghoul-on-a-stick.

The eurynomos screamed and lurched backward, ripping the spatha from Hazel's grip. The wound smoked where the Imperial gold blade had entered. Then—there is no delicate way to put it—the ghoul burst into steaming, crumbling chunks of ash. The spatha clanged to the stone floor.

The second ghoul had stopped to face Meg, as one does when one has been slashed across the thighs by an annoying twelve-year-old, but when its comrade cried out, it spun to face us. This gave Meg an opening, but instead of striking, she pushed past the monster and ran straight to my side, her blades retracting back into her rings.

"You okay?" she demanded. "Oh, NO. You're bleeding. You *said* don't get scratched. You *got* scratched!"

I wasn't sure whether to be touched by her concern or annoyed by her tone. "I didn't *plan* it, Meg."

"Guys!" yelled Lavinia.

The ghoul stepped forward, positioning itself between Hazel and her fallen spatha. Don continued to cower like a champ. Lavinia's manubalista remained only half-primed. Meg and I were now wedged side by side next to Jason's coffin.

That left Hazel, empty-handed, as the only obstacle between the eurynomos and a five-course meal.

The creature hissed, "You cannot win."

Its voice changed. Its tone became deeper, its volume modulated. "You will join your comrades in my tomb."

Between my throbbing head and my aching gut, I had trouble following the words, but Hazel seemed to understand.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "How about you stop hiding behind your creatures and show yourself!"

The eurynomos blinked. Its eyes turned from milky white to a glowing purple, like iodine flames. "Hazel Levesque. You of all people should understand the fragile boundary between life and death. But don't be afraid. I will save a special place for you at my side, along with your beloved Frank. You will make glorious skeletons."

Hazel clenched her fists. When she glanced back at us, her expression was almost as intimidating as the ghoul's. "Back up," she warned us. "As far as you can."

Meg half dragged me to the front end of the coffin. My gut felt like it had been stitched with a molten-hot zipper. Lavinia grabbed Don by his T-shirt

collar and pulled him to a safer cowering spot.

The ghoul chuckled. “How will you defeat me, Hazel? With this?” It kicked the spatha farther away behind him. “I have summoned more undead. They will be here soon.”

Despite my pain, I struggled to get up. I couldn’t leave Hazel by herself. But Lavinia put a hand on my shoulder.

“Wait,” she murmured. “Hazel’s got this.”

That seemed ridiculously optimistic, but to my shame, I stayed put. More warm blood soaked into my underwear. At least I hoped it was blood.

The eurynomos wiped drool from its mouth with one clawed finger. “Unless you intend to run and abandon that lovely coffin, you might as well surrender. We are strong underground, daughter of Pluto. Too strong for you.”

“Oh?” Hazel’s voice remained steady, almost conversational. “Strong underground. That’s good to know.”

The tunnel shook. Cracks appeared in the walls, jagged fissures branching up the stone. Beneath the ghoul’s feet, a column of white quartz erupted, skewering the monster against the ceiling and reducing it to a cloud of vulture-feather confetti.

Hazel faced us as if nothing remarkable had happened. “Don, Lavinia, get this…” She looked uneasily at the coffin. “Get this out of here. You”—she pointed at Meg—“help your friend, please. We have healers at camp who can deal with that ghoul scratch.”

“Wait!” I said. “Wh-what just happened? Its voice—”

“I’ve seen that happen before with a ghoul,” Hazel said grimly. “I’ll explain later. Right now, get going. I’ll follow in a sec.”

I started to protest, but Hazel stopped me with a shake of her head. “I’m just going to pick up my sword and make sure no more of those things can follow us. Go!”

Rubble trickled from new cracks in the ceiling. Perhaps leaving wasn’t such a bad idea.

Leaning on Meg, I managed to stagger farther down the tunnel. Lavinia and Don lugged Jason’s coffin. I was in so much pain I didn’t even have the energy to yell at Lavinia to carry it like a couch.

We’d gone perhaps fifty feet when the tunnel behind us rumbled even more strongly than before. I looked back just in time to get hit in the face with a billowing cloud of debris.

“Hazel?” Lavinia called into the swirling dust.

A heartbeat later, Hazel Levesque emerged, coated from head to toe in glittering powdered quartz. Her sword glowed in her hand.

“I’m fine,” she announced. “But nobody’s going to be sneaking out that way anymore. Now”—she pointed at the coffin—“somebody want to tell me who’s in there?”

I really didn’t.

Not after I’d seen how Hazel skewered her enemies.

Still…I owed it to Jason. Hazel had been his friend.

I steeled my nerves, opened my mouth to speak, and was beaten to the punch by Hazel herself.

“It’s Jason,” she said, as if the information had been whispered in her ear. “Oh, gods.”

She ran to the coffin. She fell to her knees and threw her arms across the lid. She let out a single devastated sob. Then she lowered her head and shivered in silence. Strands of her hair sketched through the quartz dust on the polished wood surface, leaving squiggly lines like the readings of a seismograph.

Without looking up, she murmured, “I had nightmares. A boat. A man on a horse. A…a spear. How did it happen?”

I did my best to explain. I told her about my fall into the mortal world, my adventures with Meg, our fight aboard Caligula’s yacht, and how Jason had died saving us. Recounting the story brought back all the pain and terror. I remembered the sharp ozone smell of the wind spirits swirling around Meg and Jason, the bite of zip-tie handcuffs around my wrists, Caligula’s pitiless, delighted boast: *You don’t walk away from me alive!*

It was all so awful, I momentarily forgot about the agonizing cut across my belly.

Lavinia stared at the floor. Meg did her best to stanch my bleeding with one of the extra dresses from her backpack. Don watched the ceiling, where a new crack was zigzagging over our heads.

“Hate to interrupt,” said the faun, “but maybe we should continue this outside?”

Hazel pressed her fingers against the coffin lid. “I’m so angry at you. Doing this to Piper. To us. Not letting us be there for you. What were you thinking?”

It took me a moment to realize she wasn't talking to us. She was speaking to Jason.

Slowly, she stood. Her mouth trembled. She straightened, as if summoning internal columns of quartz to brace her skeletal system.

"Let me carry one side," she said. "Let's bring him home."

We trudged along in silence, the sorriest pallbearers ever. All of us were covered in dust and monster ash. At the front of the coffin, Lavinia squirmed in her armor, occasionally glancing over at Hazel, who walked with her eyes straight ahead. She didn't even seem to notice the random vulture feather fluttering from her shirtsleeve.

Meg and Don carried the back of the casket. Meg's eyes were bruising up nicely from the car crash, making her look like a large, badly dressed raccoon. Don kept twitching, tilting his head to the left as if he wanted to hear what his shoulder was saying.

I stumbled after them, Meg's spare dress pressed against my gut. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, but the cut still burned and needled. I hoped Hazel was right about her healers being able to fix me. I did not relish the idea of becoming an extra for *The Walking Dead*.

Hazel's calmness made me uneasy. I almost would've preferred it if she screamed and threw things at me. Her misery was like the cold gravity of a mountain. You could stand next to that mountain and close your eyes, and even if you couldn't see it or hear it, you *knew* it was there—unspeakably heavy and powerful, a geological force so ancient it made even immortal gods feel like gnats. I feared what would happen if Hazel's emotions turned volcanically active.

At last we emerged into the open air. We stood on a rock promontory about halfway up a hillside, with the valley of New Rome spread out below. In the twilight, the hills had turned violet. The cool breeze smelled of woodsmoke and lilacs.

"Wow," said Meg, taking in the view.

Just as I remembered, the Little Tiber wended across the valley floor, making a glittering curlicue that emptied into a blue lake where the camp's belly button might have been. On the north shore of that lake rose New Rome itself, a smaller version of the original imperial city.

From what Leo had said about the recent battle, I'd expected to see the place leveled. At this distance, though, in the waning light, everything

looked normal—the gleaming white buildings with red-tiled roofs, the domed Senate House, the Circus Maximus, and the Colosseum.

The lake's south shore was the site of Temple Hill, with its chaotic assortment of shrines and monuments. On the summit, overshadowing everything else, was my father's impressively ego-tastic Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. If possible, his Roman incarnation, Jupiter, was even more insufferable than his original Greek personality of Zeus. (And, yes, we gods have multiple personalities, because you mortals keep changing your minds about what we're like. It's exasperating.)

In the past, I'd always hated looking at Temple Hill, because my shrine wasn't the largest. Obviously, it *should* have been the largest. Now I hated looking at the place for a different reason. All I could think of was the diorama Meg was carrying, and the sketchbooks in her backpack—the designs for Temple Hill as Jason Grace had reimagined it. Compared to Jason's foam-core display, with its handwritten notes and glued-on Monopoly tokens, the real Temple Hill seemed an unworthy tribute to the gods. It could never mean as much as Jason's goodness, his fervent desire to honor *every* god and leave no one out.

I forced myself to look away.

Directly below, about half a mile from our ledge, stood Camp Jupiter itself. With its picketed walls, watchtowers, and trenches, its neat rows of barracks lining two principal streets, it could have been any Roman legion camp, anywhere in the old empire, at any time during Rome's many centuries of rule. Romans were so consistent about how they built their forts—whether they meant to stay there for a night or a decade—that if you knew one camp, you knew them all. You could wake up in the dead of night, stumble around in total darkness, and know exactly where everything was. Of course, when I visited Roman camps, I usually spent all my time in the commander's tent, lounging and eating grapes like I used to do with Commodus…. Oh, gods, why was I torturing myself with such thoughts?

"Okay." Hazel's voice shook me out of my reverie. "When we get to camp, here's the story: Lavinia, you went to Temescal on my orders, because you saw the hearse go over the railing. I stayed on duty until the next shift arrived, then I rushed down to help you, because I thought you might be in danger. We fought the ghouls, saved these guys, et cetera. Got it?"

"So, about that…" Don interrupted, "I'm sure you guys can manage from here, right? Seeing as you might get in trouble or whatever. I'll just be

slipping off—”

Lavinia gave him a hard stare.

“Or I can stick around,” he said hastily. “You know, happy to help.”

Hazel shifted her grip on the coffin’s handle. “Remember, we’re an honor guard. No matter how bedraggled we look, we have a duty. We’re bringing home a fallen comrade. Understood?”

“Yes, Centurion,” Lavinia said sheepishly. “And, Hazel? Thanks.”

Hazel winced, as if regretting her soft heart. “Once we get to the *principia*”—her eyes settled on me—“our visiting god can explain to the leadership what happened to Jason Grace.”

5

Hi, everybody,
Here's a little tune I call
"All the Ways I Suck"

THE LEGION SENTRIES SPOTTED us from a long way off, as legion sentries are supposed to do.

By the time our small band arrived at the fort's main gates, a crowd had gathered. Demigods lined either side of the street and watched in curious silence as we carried Jason's coffin through the camp. No one questioned us. No one tried to stop us. The weight of all those eyes was oppressive.

Hazel led us straight down the Via Praetoria.

Some legionnaires stood on the porches of their barracks—their half-polished armor temporarily forgotten, guitars set aside, card games unfinished. Glowing purple *Lares*, the house gods of the legion, milled about, drifting through walls or people with little regard for personal space. Giant eagles whirled overhead, eyeing us like potentially tasty rodents.

I began to realize how *sparse* the crowd was. The camp seemed…not deserted, exactly, but only half full. A few young heroes walked on crutches. Others had arms in casts. Perhaps some of them were just in their barracks, or in the sick bay, or on an extended march, but I didn't like the haunted, grief-stricken expressions of the legionnaires who watched us.

I remembered the gloating words of the eurynomos at Lake Temescal: *I HAVE ALREADY TASTED THE FLESH OF YOUR COMRADES! AT THE BLOOD MOON, YOU WILL JOIN THEM.*

I wasn’t sure what a blood moon was. Lunar things were more my sister’s department. But I didn’t like the sound of it. I’d had quite enough of blood. From the looks of the legionnaires, so had they.

Then I thought about something else the ghoul had said: *YOU WILL ALL JOIN THE KING’S DEAD*. I thought about the words of the prophecy we’d received in the Burning Maze, and a troubling realization started to form in my head. I did my best to suppress it. I’d already had my full day’s quota of terror.

We passed the storefronts of merchants who were allowed to operate inside the fort’s walls—only the most essential services, like a chariot dealership, an armory, a gladiator supply store, and a coffee bar. In front of the coffee place stood a two-headed barista, glowering at us with both faces, his green apron stained with latte foam.

Finally we reached the main intersection, where two roads came to a T in front of the principia. On the steps of the gleaming white headquarters building, the legion’s praetors waited for us.

I almost didn’t recognize Frank Zhang. The first time I’d seen him, back when I was a god and he was a legion newbie, Frank had been a baby-faced, heavyset boy with dark flattop hair and an adorable fixation on archery. He’d had this idea that I might be his father. He prayed to me all the time. Honestly, he was so cute I would’ve been happy to adopt him, but alas, he was one of Mars’s.

The second time I saw Frank, during his voyage on the *Argo II*, he’d had a growth spurt or a magical testosterone injection or something. He’d grown taller, stronger, more imposing—though still in an adorable, cuddly, grizzly-bear sort of way.

Now, as I’d often noticed happening with young men still coming into their own, Frank’s weight had begun to catch up to his growth spurt. He was once again a big, girthy guy with baby cheeks you just wanted to pinch, only now he was larger and more muscular. He’d apparently fallen out of bed and scrambled to meet us, despite it being just early evening. His hair stuck up on top like a breaking wave. One of his jean cuffs was tucked into his sock. His top was a yellow silk nightshirt decorated with eagles and bears—a fashion statement he was doing his best to cover with his purple praetor’s cloak.

One thing that hadn’t changed was his bearing—that slightly awkward stance, that faint perplexed frown, as if he were constantly thinking, *Am I*

really supposed to be here?

That feeling was understandable. Frank had climbed the ranks from *probatio* to centurion to praetor in record time. Not since Julius Caesar had a Roman officer risen so rapidly and brightly. That wasn't a comparison I would have shared with Frank, though, given what happened to my man Julius.

My gaze drifted to the young woman at Frank's side: Praetor Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano…and I remembered.

A bowling ball of panic formed in my heart and rolled into my lower intestines. It was a good thing I wasn't carrying Jason's coffin or I would have dropped it.

How can I explain this to you?

Have you ever had an experience so painful or embarrassing you *literally* forgot it happened? Your mind disassociates, scuttles away from the incident yelling *Nope, nope, nope,* and refuses to acknowledge the memory ever again?

That was me with Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano.

Oh, yes, I knew who she was. I was familiar with her name and reputation. I was fully aware we were destined to run into her at Camp Jupiter. The prophecy we'd deciphered in the Burning Maze had told me as much.

But my fuzzy mortal brain had completely refused to make the most important connection: that this Reyna was *that* Reyna, the one whose face I had been shown long ago by a certain annoying goddess of love.

That's her! my brain screamed at me, as I stood before her in my flabby and acne-spotted glory, clutching a bloody dress to my gut. *Oh, wow, she's beautiful!*

Now *you recognize her?* I mentally screamed back. *Now you want to talk about her? Can't you please forget again?*

But, like, remember what Venus said? my brain insisted. *You're supposed to stay away from Reyna or—*

Yes, I remember! Shut up!

You have conversations like this with your brain, don't you? It's completely normal, right?

Reyna was indeed beautiful and imposing. Her Imperial gold armor was cloaked in a mantle of purple. Military medals twinkled on her chest. Her

dark ponytail swept over her shoulder like a horsewhip, and her obsidian eyes were every bit as piercing as those of the eagles that circled above us.

I managed to wrest my eyes from her. My face burned with humiliation. I could still hear the other gods laughing after Venus made her proclamation to me, her dire warnings if I should ever dare—

PING! Lavinia's manubalista chose that moment to crank itself another half notch, mercifully diverting everyone's attention to her.

"Uh, s-so," she stammered, "we were on duty when I saw this hearse go flying over the guardrail—"

Reyna raised her hand for silence.

"Centurion Levesque." Reyna's tone was guarded and weary, as if we weren't the first battered procession to tote a coffin into camp. "Your report, please."

Hazel glanced at the other pallbearers. Together, they gently lowered the casket.

"Praetors," Hazel said, "we rescued these travelers at the borders of camp. This is Meg."

"Hi," said Meg. "Is there a bathroom? I need to pee."

Hazel looked flustered. "Er, in a sec, Meg. And this…" She hesitated, as if she couldn't believe what she was about to say. "This is Apollo."

The crowd murmured uneasily. I caught snatches of their conversations:

"Did she say—?"

"Not actually—"

"Dude, obviously not—"

"Named after—?"

"In his dreams—"

"Settle down," Frank Zhang ordered, pulling his purple mantle tighter around his jammie top. He studied me, perhaps looking for any sign that I was in fact Apollo, the god he'd always admired. He blinked as if the concept had short-circuited his brain.

"Hazel, can you…explain that?" he pleaded. "And, erm, the coffin?"

Hazel locked her golden eyes on me, giving me a silent command: *Tell them.*

I didn't know how to start.

I was not a great orator like Julius or Cicero. I wasn't a weaver of tall tales like Hermes. (Boy, that guy can tell some whoppers.) How could I

explain the many months of horrifying experiences that had led to Meg and me standing here, with the body of our heroic friend?

I looked down at my ukulele.

I thought of Piper McLean aboard Caligula's yachts—how she'd burst into singing "Life of Illusion" in the midst of a gang of hardened mercenaries. She had rendered them helpless, entranced by her serenade about melancholy and regret.

I wasn't a charmspeaker like Piper. But I *was* a musician, and surely Jason deserved a tribute.

After what had happened with the eurynomoi, I felt skittish of my ukulele, so I began to sing a cappella.

For the first few bars, my voice quavered. I had no idea what I was doing. The words simply billowed up from deep inside me like the clouds of debris from Hazel's collapsed tunnel.

I sang of my fall from Olympus—how I had landed in New York and become bound to Meg McCaffrey. I sang of our time at Camp Half-Blood, where we'd discovered the Triumvirate's plot to control the great Oracles and thus the future of the world. I sang of Meg's childhood, her terrible years of mental abuse in the household of Nero, and how we'd finally driven that emperor from the Grove of Dodona. I sang of our battle against Commodus at the Waystation in Indianapolis, of our harrowing journey into Caligula's Burning Maze to free the Sibyl of Erythraea.

After each verse, I sang a refrain about Jason: his final stand on Caligula's yacht, courageously facing death so that we could survive and continue our quest. Everything we had been through led to Jason's sacrifice. Everything that might come next, if we were lucky enough to defeat the Triumvirate and Python at Delphi, would be possible because of *him*.

The song really wasn't about me at all. (I know. I could hardly believe it, either.) It was "The Fall of Jason Grace." In the last verses, I sang of Jason's dream for Temple Hill, his plan to add shrines until every god and goddess, no matter how obscure, was properly honored.

I took the diorama from Meg, lifted it to show the assembled demigods, then set it on Jason's coffin like a soldier's flag.

I'm not sure how long I sang. When I finished the last line, the sky was fully dark. My throat felt as hot and dry as a spent bullet cartridge.

The giant eagles had gathered on the nearby rooftops. They stared at me with something like respect.

The legionnaires' faces were streaked with tears. Some sniffled and wiped their noses. Others embraced and wept silently.

I realized they weren't just grieving for Jason. The song had unleashed their collective sorrow about the recent battle, their losses, which—given the sparseness of the crowd—must have been extreme. Jason's song became their song. By honoring him, we honored all the fallen.

On the steps of the principia, the praetors stirred from their private anguish. Reyna took a long, shaky breath. She exchanged a look with Frank, who was having difficulty controlling the tremble of his lower lip. The two leaders seemed to come to silent agreement.

"We will have a state funeral," Reyna announced.

"And we'll realize Jason's dream," Frank added. "Those temples and—everything Ja—" His voice caught on Jason's name. He needed a count of five to compose himself. "Everything he envisioned. We'll build it all in one weekend."

I could feel the mood of the crowd change, as palpably as a weather front, their grief hardening into steely determination.

Some nodded and murmured assent. A few shouted *Ave!* Hail! The rest of the crowd picked up the chant. Javelins pounded against shields.

No one balked at the idea of rebuilding Temple Hill in a weekend. A task like that would've been impossible even for the most skilled engineering corps. But this was a Roman legion.

"Apollo and Meg will be guests of Camp Jupiter," Reyna said. "We will find them a place to stay—"

"And a bathroom?" Meg pleaded, dancing with her knees crossed.

Reyna managed a faint smile. "Of course. Together, we'll mourn and honor our dead. Afterward, we will discuss our plan of war."

The legionnaires cheered and banged their shields.

I opened my mouth to say something eloquent, to thank Reyna and Frank for their hospitality.

But all my remaining energy had been expended on my song. My gut wound burned. My head twirled on my neck like a carousel.

I fell face-first and bit the dirt.

6

Sailing north to war
With my Shirley Temple and
Three cherries. Fear me.

OH, THE DREAMS.

Dear reader, if you are tired of hearing about my awful prophetic nightmares, I don't blame you. Just think how *I* felt experiencing them firsthand. It was like having the Pythia of Delphi butt-call me all night long, mumbling lines of prophecy I hadn't asked for and didn't want to hear.

I saw a line of luxury yachts cutting through moonlit waves off the California coast—fifty boats in a tight chevron formation, strings of lights gleaming along their bows, purple pennants snapping in the wind on illuminated com towers. The decks were crawling with all manner of monsters—Cyclopes, wild centaurs, big-eared *pandai,* and chest-headed *blemmyae*. On the aft deck of each yacht, a mob of the creatures seemed to be constructing something like a shed or…or some sort of siege weapon.

My dream zoomed in on the bridge of the lead ship. The crew hustled about, checking monitors and adjusting instruments. Lounging behind them, in matching gold-upholstered La-Z-Boy recliners, were two of my least favorite people in the world.

On the left sat the emperor Commodus. His pastel-blue beach shorts showed off his perfect tanned calves and pedicured bare feet. His gray Indianapolis Colts hoodie was unzipped over his bare chest and perfectly sculpted abs. He had a lot of nerve wearing Colts gear, since we'd

humiliated him in the team's home stadium only a few weeks before. (Of course we'd humiliated ourselves, too, but I wanted to forget that part.)

His face was almost as I remembered: annoyingly handsome, with a haughty chiseled profile and ringlets of golden hair framing his brow. The skin around his eyes, however, looked as if it had been sandblasted. His pupils were cloudy. The last time we'd met, I had blinded him with a burst of godly radiance, and it was obvious he still hadn't healed. That was the only thing that pleased me about seeing him again.

In the other recliner sat Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, otherwise known as Caligula.

Rage tinted my dream blood-pink. How could he lounge there so relaxed in his ridiculous captain's outfit—those white slacks and boat shoes, that navy jacket over a striped collarless shirt, that officer's hat tilted at a rakish angle on his walnut curls—when only a few days before, he had killed Jason Grace? How dare he sip a refreshing iced beverage garnished with three maraschino cherries *(Three! Monstrous!)* and smile with such self-satisfaction?

Caligula looked human enough, but I knew better than to credit him with any sort of compassion. I wanted to strangle him. Alas, I could do nothing except watch and fume.

"Pilot," Caligula called out lazily. "What's our speed?"

"Five knots, sir," said one of the uniformed mortals. "Should I increase?"

"No, no." Caligula plucked out one of the maraschino cherries and popped it in his mouth. He chewed and grinned, showing bright red teeth. "In fact, let's slow to four knots. The journey is half the fun!"

"Yessir!"

Commodus scowled. He swirled the ice in his own drink, which was clear and bubbly with red syrup pooled at the bottom. He only had two maraschino cherries, no doubt because Caligula would never allow Commodus to equal him in anything.

"I don't understand why we're moving so slowly," Commodus grumbled. "At top speed, we could have been there by now."

Caligula chuckled. "My friend, it's all about timing. We have to allow our deceased ally his best window of attack."

Commodus shuddered. "I *hate* our deceased ally. Are you sure he can be controlled—"

“We’ve discussed this.” Caligula’s singsong tone was light and airy and pleasantly homicidal, as if to say: *The next time you question me, I will control* you *with some cyanide in your beverage.* “You should trust me, Commodus. Remember who aided you in your hour of need.”

“I’ve thanked you a dozen times already,” Commodus said. “Besides, it wasn’t my fault. How was I supposed to know Apollo still had some light left in him?” He blinked painfully. “He got the better of you—and your horse, too.”

A cloud passed over Caligula’s face. “Yes, well, soon, we’ll make things right. Between your troops and mine, we have more than enough power to overwhelm the battered Twelfth Legion. And if they prove too stubborn to surrender, we always have Plan B.” He called over his shoulder, “Oh, Boost?”

A pandos hurried in from the aft deck, his enormous shaggy ears flopping around him like throw rugs. In his hands was a large sheet of paper, folded into sections like a map or set of instructions. “Y-yes, Princeps?”

“Progress report.”

“Ah.” Boost’s dark furry face twitched. “Good! Good, master! Another week?”

“A week,” Caligula said.

“Well, sir, these instructions…” Boost turned the paper upside down and frowned at it. “We are still locating all the ‘slot A’s’ on ‘assembly piece sevens.’ And they did not send us enough lug nuts. And the batteries required are not standard size, so—”

“A week,” Caligula repeated, his tone still pleasant. “Yet the blood moon will rise in…”

The pandos winced. “Five days?”

“So you can have your work done in five days? Excellent! Carry on.”

Boost gulped, then scuttled away as fast as his furry feet could carry him.

Caligula smiled at his fellow emperor. “You see, Commodus? Soon Camp Jupiter will be ours. With luck, the Sibylline Books will be in our hands as well. Then we’ll have some proper bargaining power. When it’s time to face Python and carve up our portions of the world, you’ll remember who helped you…and who did not.”

“Oh, I’ll remember. Stupid Nero.” Commodus poked the ice cubes in his drink. “Which one is this again, the Shirley Temple?”

“No, that’s the Roy Rogers,” Caligula said. “Mine is the Shirley Temple.”

“And you’re sure this is what modern warriors drink when they go into battle?”

“Absolutely,” Caligula said. “Now enjoy the ride, my friend. You have five whole days to work on your tan and get your vision back. Then we’ll have some lovely carnage in the Bay Area!”

The scene vanished, and I fell into cold darkness.

I found myself in a dimly lit stone chamber filled with shuffling, stinking, groaning undead. Some were as withered as Egyptian mummies. Others looked almost alive except for the ghastly wounds that had killed them. At the far end of the room, between two rough-hewn columns, sat…a presence, wreathed in a magenta haze. It raised its skeletal visage, fixing me with its burning purple eyes—the same eyes that had stared out at me from the possessed ghoul in the tunnel—and began to laugh.

My gut wound ignited like a line of gunpowder.

I woke, screaming in agony. I found myself shaking and sweating in a strange room.

“You too?” Meg asked.

She stood next to my cot, leaning out an open window and digging in a flower box. Her gardening belt’s pockets sagged with bulbs, seed packets, and tools. In one muddy hand, she held a trowel. Children of Demeter. You can’t take them anywhere without them playing in the dirt.

“Wh-what’s going on?” I tried to sit up, which was a mistake.

My gut wound really was a fiery line of agony. I looked down and found my bare midsection wrapped in bandages that smelled of healing herbs and ointments. If the camp’s healers had already treated me, why was I still in so much pain?

“Where are we?” I croaked.

“Coffee shop.”

Even by Meg’s standards, that statement seemed ridiculous.

Our room had no coffee bar, no espresso machine, no barista, no yummy pastries. It was a simple whitewashed cube with a cot against either wall, an open window between them, and a trapdoor in the far corner, which led me to believe we were on an upper story. We might have been in a prison cell, except there were no bars on the window, and a prison cot would have been

more comfortable. (Yes, I am sure. I did some research on Folsom Prison with Johnny Cash. Long story.)

"The coffee shop is downstairs," Meg clarified. "This is Bombilo's spare room."

I remembered the two-headed, green-aproned barista who had scowled at us on the Via Praetoria. I wondered why he would've been kind enough to give us lodging, and why, of all places, the legion had decided to put us here. "Why, exactly—?"

"Lemurian spice," Meg said. "Bombilo had the nearest supply. The healers needed it for your wound."

She shrugged, like, *Healers, what can you do?* Then she went back to planting iris bulbs.

I sniffed at my bandages. One of the scents I detected was indeed Lemurian spice. Effective stuff against the undead, though the Lemurian Festival wasn't until June, and it was barely April…. Ah, no wonder we'd ended up in the coffee shop. Every year, retailers seemed to start Lemurian season earlier and earlier—Lemurian-spice lattes, Lemurian-spice muffins—as if we couldn't wait to celebrate the season of exorcising evil spirits with pastries that tasted faintly of lima beans and grave dust. Yum.

What else did I smell in that healing balm…crocus, myrrh, unicorn-horn shavings? Oh, these Roman healers were good. Then why didn't I feel better?

"They didn't want to move you too many times," Meg said. "So we just kind of stayed here. It's okay. Bathroom downstairs. And free coffee."

"You don't drink coffee."

"I do now."

I shuddered. "A caffeinated Meg. Just what I need. How long have I been out?"

"Day and a half."

"What?!"

"You needed sleep. Also, you're less annoying unconscious."

I didn't have the energy for a proper retort. I rubbed the gunk out of my eyes, then I forced myself to sit up, fighting down the pain and nausea.

Meg studied me with concern, which must have meant I looked even worse than I felt.

"How bad?" she asked.

“I’m okay,” I lied. “What did you mean earlier, when you said, ‘You too’?”

Her expression closed up like a hurricane shutter. “Nightmares. I woke up screaming a couple of times. You slept through it, but…” She picked a clod of dirt off her trowel. “This place reminds me of…you know.”

I regretted I hadn’t thought about that sooner. After Meg’s experience growing up in Nero’s Imperial Household, surrounded by Latin-speaking servants and guards in Roman armor, purple banners, all the regalia of the old empire—of course Camp Jupiter must have triggered unwelcome memories.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Did you dream…anything I should know about?”

“The usual.” Her tone made it clear she didn’t want to elaborate. “What about you?”

I thought about my dream of the two emperors sailing leisurely in our direction, drinking cherry-garnished mocktails while their troops rushed to assemble secret weapons they’d ordered from IKEA.

Our deceased ally. Plan B. Five days.

I saw those burning purple eyes in a chamber filled with the undead. The *king’s* dead.

“The usual,” I agreed. “Help me up?”

It hurt to stand, but if I’d been lying in that cot for a day and a half, I wanted to move before my muscles turned to tapioca. Also, I was beginning to realize I was hungry and thirsty and, in the immortal words of Meg McCaffrey, I needed to pee. Human bodies are annoying that way.

I braced myself against the windowsill and peered outside. Below, demigods bustled along the Via Praetoria—carrying supplies, reporting for duty assignments, hurrying between the barracks and the mess hall. The pall of shock and grief seemed to have faded. Now everyone looked busy and determined. Craning my head and looking south, I could see Temple Hill abuzz with activity. Siege engines had been converted to cranes and earthmovers. Scaffolds had been erected in a dozen locations. The sounds of hammering and stone-cutting echoed across the valley. From my vantage point, I could identify at least ten new small shrines and two large temples that hadn’t been there when we arrived, with more in the works.

“Wow,” I murmured. “Those Romans don’t mess around.”

“Tonight’s the funeral for Jason,” Meg informed me. “They’re trying to finish up work before then.”

Judging from the angle of the sun, I guessed it was about two in the afternoon. Given their pace so far, I figured that would give the legion ample time to finish Temple Hill and maybe construct a sports stadium or two before dinner.

Jason would have been proud. I wished he could be here to see what he had inspired.

My vision fluttered and darkened. I thought I might be passing out again. Then I realized something large and dark *had* in fact fluttered right by my face, straight from the open window.

I turned and found a raven sitting on my cot. It ruffled its oily feathers, regarding me with a beady black eye. *SQUAWK!*

"Meg," I said, "are you seeing this?"

"Yeah." She didn't even look up from her iris bulbs. "Hey, Frank. What's up?"

The bird shape-shifted, its form swelling into that of a bulky human, its feathers melting into clothes, until Frank Zhang sat before us, his hair now properly washed and combed, his silk nightshirt changed for a purple Camp Jupiter tee.

"Hey, Meg," he said, as if it were completely normal to change species during a conversation. "Everything's on schedule. I was just checking to see if Apollo was awake, which…obviously, he is." He gave me an awkward wave. "I mean, you are. Since, er, I'm sitting on your cot. I should get up."

He rose, tugged at his shirt, then didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. At one time, I would have been used to such nervous behavior from mortals I encountered, but now, it took me a moment to realize Frank was still in awe of me. Perhaps, being a shape-shifter, Frank was more willing than most to believe that, despite my unimpressive mortal appearance, I was still the same old god of archery inside.

You see? I told you Frank was adorable.

"Anyway," he continued, "Meg and I have been talking, the last day or so, while you were passed out—I mean, recovering—sleeping, you know. It's fine. You needed sleep. Hope you feel better."

Despite how terrible I felt, I couldn't help but smile. "You've been very kind to us, Praetor Zhang. Thank you."

"Erm, sure. It's, you know, an honor, seeing as you're…or you were—"

"Ugh, Frank." Meg turned from her flower box. "It's just Lester. Don't treat him like a big deal."

“Now, Meg,” I said, “if Frank wants to treat me like a big deal—”

“Frank, just tell him.”

The praetor glanced back and forth between us, as if making sure the Meg and Apollo Show was over for now. “So, Meg explained the prophecy you got in the Burning Maze. *Apollo faces death in Tarquin’s tomb unless the doorway to the soundless god is opened by Bellona’s daughter*, right?”

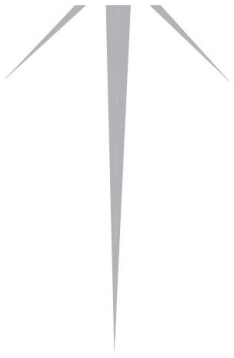
I shivered. I didn’t want to be reminded of those words, especially given my dreams, and the implication that I would soon face death. Been there. Done that. Got the belly wound.

“Yes,” I said warily. “I don’t suppose you’ve figured out what those lines mean and have already undertaken the necessary quests?”

“Um, not exactly,” Frank said. “But the prophecy did answer a few questions about…well, about what’s been happening around here. It gave Ella and Tyson enough information to work with. They think they might have a lead.”

“Ella and Tyson…” I said, sifting through my foggy mortal brain. “The harpy and the Cyclops who have been working to reconstruct the Sibylline Books.”

“Those are the ones,” Frank agreed. “If you’re feeling up to it, I thought we could take a walk into New Rome.”



7

Nice stroll into town
Happy birthday to Lester
Here's some gift-wrapped pain

I DID NOT FEEL up to it.

My gut hurt terribly. My legs could barely support my weight. Even after using the restroom, washing, dressing, and grabbing a Lemurian-spice latte and a muffin from our grumpy host, Bombilo, I didn't see how I could walk the mile or so to New Rome.

I had no desire to find out more about the prophecy from the Burning Maze. I didn't want to face more impossible challenges, especially after my dream of that thing in the tomb. I didn't even want to be human. But, alas, I had no choice.

What do mortals say—*suck it up*? I sucked it way, way up.

Meg stayed at camp. She had an appointment in an hour to feed the unicorns with Lavinia, and Meg was afraid if she went anywhere, she might miss it. Given Lavinia's reputation for going AWOL, I supposed Meg's concern was valid.

Frank led me through the main gates. The sentries snapped to attention. They had to hold that pose for quite a while, since I was moving at the speed of cold syrup. I caught them studying me apprehensively—perhaps because they were worried I might launch into another heartbreaking song, or perhaps because they still couldn't believe this shambling heap of adolescence had once been the god Apollo.

The afternoon was California perfect: turquoise sky, golden grass rippling on the hillsides, eucalyptus and cedar rustling in the warm breeze. This should have dispelled any thoughts of dark tunnels and ghouls, yet I couldn't seem to get the smell of grave dust out of my nostrils. Drinking a Lemurian-spice latte did not help.

Frank walked at my speed, staying close enough that I could lean on him if I felt shaky, but not insisting on helping.

"So," he said at last, "what's with you and Reyna?"

I stumbled, sending fresh jabs of pain through my abdomen. "What? Nothing. What?"

Frank brushed a raven feather off his cloak. I wondered how that worked, exactly—being left with bits and pieces after shape-shifting. Did he ever discard a spare feather and realize later, *Whoops, that was my pinky finger*? I'd heard rumors that Frank could even turn into a swarm of bees. Even I, a former god who used to transform himself all the time, had no idea how he managed that.

"It's just that…when you saw Reyna," he said, "you froze, like…I dunno, you realized you owed her money or something."

I had to restrain a bitter laugh. If only my problem regarding Reyna were as simple as that.

The incident had come back to me with glass-shard clarity: Venus scolding me, warning me, upbraiding me as only she could. *You will not stick your ugly, unworthy godly face anywhere near her, or I swear on the Styx…*

And of course she'd done this in the throne room, in the presence of all the other Olympians, as they howled with cruel amusement and shouted *Ooh!* Even my father had joined in. Oh, yes. He loved every minute of it.

I shuddered.

"There is nothing *with* Reyna and me," I said quite honestly. "I don't think we've ever exchanged more than a few words."

Frank studied my expression. Obviously, he realized I was holding something back, but he didn't push. "Okay. Well, you'll see her tonight at the funeral. She's trying to get some sleep right now."

I almost asked why Reyna would be asleep in the middle of the afternoon. Then I remembered that Frank had been wearing a pajama shirt when we'd encountered him at dinnertime…. Had that really been the day before yesterday?

"You're taking shifts," I realized. "So one of you is always on duty?"

“It’s the only way,” he agreed. “We’re still on high alert. Everyone is edgy. There’s so much to do since the battle….”

He said the word *battle* the same way Hazel had, as if it was a singular, terrible turning point in history.

Like all the divinations Meg and I had retrieved during our adventures, the Dark Prophecy’s nightmarish prediction about Camp Jupiter remained burned into my mind:

> *The words that memory wrought are set to fire,*
> *Ere new moon rises o’er the Devil’s Mount.*
> *The changeling lord shall face a challenge dire,*
> *Till bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.*

After hearing that, Leo Valdez had raced across country on his bronze dragon, hoping to warn the camp. According to Leo, he had arrived just in time, but the toll had still been horrendous.

Frank must have read my pained expression.

“It would’ve been worse if it hadn’t been for you,” he said, which only made me feel guiltier. “If you hadn’t sent Leo here to warn us. One day, out of nowhere, he just flew right in.”

“That must have been quite a shock,” I said. “Since you thought Leo was dead.”

Frank’s dark eyes glittered like they still belonged to a raven. “Yeah. We were so mad at him for making us worry, we lined up and took turns hitting him.”

“We did that at Camp Half-Blood, too,” I said. “Greek minds think alike.”

“Mmm.” Frank’s gaze drifted toward the horizon. “We had about twenty-four hours to prepare. It helped. But it wasn’t enough. They came from over there.”

He pointed north to the Berkeley Hills. “They swarmed. Only way to describe it. I’d fought undead before, but this…” He shook his head. “Hazel called them zombies. My grandmother would have called them *jiangshi*. The Romans have a lot of words for them: *immortuos, lamia, nuntius*.”

“*Messenger*,” I said, translating the last word. It had always seemed an odd term to me. A messenger from whom? Not Hades. He hated it when corpses wandered around the mortal world. It made him look like a sloppy warden.

“The Greeks call them vrykolakai,” I said. “Usually, it’s rare to see even one.”

“There were hundreds,” Frank said. “Along with dozens of those other ghoul things, the eurynomoi, acting as herders. We cut them down. They just kept coming. You’d think having a fire-breathing dragon would’ve been a game-changer, but Festus could only do so much. The undead aren’t as flammable as you might think.”

Hades had explained that to me once, in one of his famously awkward “too much information” attempts at small talk. Flames didn’t deter the undead. They just wandered right through, no matter how extra crispy they became. That’s why he didn’t use the Phlegethon, the River of Fire, as the boundary of his kingdom. Running water, however, especially the dark magical waters of the River Styx, was a different story….

I studied the glittering current of the Little Tiber. Suddenly a line of the Dark Prophecy made sense to me. “*Bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.* You stopped them at the river.”

Frank nodded. “They don’t like freshwater. That’s where we turned the battle. But that line about ‘bodies beyond count’? It doesn’t mean what you think.”

“Then what—?”

“HALT!” yelled a voice right in front of me.

I’d been so lost in Frank’s story, I hadn’t realized how close we were getting to the city. I hadn’t even noticed the statue on the side of the road until it screamed at me.

Terminus, the god of boundaries, looked just as I remembered him. From the waist up, he was a finely sculpted man with a large nose, curly hair, and a disgruntled expression (which may have been because no one had ever carved him a pair of arms). From the waist down, he was a block of white marble. I used to tease him that he should try skinny jeans, as they’d be very slimming. From the way he glowered at me now, I guessed he remembered those insults.

“Well, well,” he said. “Who do we have here?”

I sighed. “Terminus, can we not?”

“No!” he barked. “No, we can*not* not. I need to see identification.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Uh, Terminus…” He tapped the praetor’s laurels on his breastplate.

“Yes, Praetor Frank Zhang. You are good to go. But your *friend* here—”

“Terminus,” I protested, “you know very well who I am.”

“Identification!”

A cold slimy feeling spread outward from my Lemurian spice–bandaged gut. “Oh, you can’t mean—”

“ID.”

I wanted to protest this unnecessary cruelty. Alas, there is no arguing with bureaucrats, traffic cops, or boundary gods. Struggling would just make the pain last longer.

Slumped in defeat, I pulled out my wallet. I produced the junior driver’s license Zeus had provided me when I fell to earth. Name: Lester Papadopoulos. Age: Sixteen. State: New York. Photo: 100 percent eye acid.

“Hand it over,” Terminus demanded.

“You don’t—” I caught myself before I could say *have hands.* Terminus was stubbornly delusional about his phantom appendages. I held up the driver’s license for him to see. Frank leaned in, curious, then caught me glaring and backed away.

“Very well, *Lester*,” Terminus crowed. “It’s unusual to have a mortal visitor in our city—an *extremely* mortal visitor—but I suppose we can allow it. Here to shop for a new toga? Or perhaps some skinny jeans?”

I swallowed back my bitterness. Is there anyone more vindictive than a minor god who finally gets to lord it over a major god?

“May we pass?” I asked.

“Any weapons to declare?”

In better times, I would have answered, *Only my killer personality.* Alas, I was beyond even finding that ironic. The question did make me wonder what had happened to my ukulele, bow, and quiver, however. Perhaps they were tucked under my cot? If the Romans had somehow lost my quiver, along with the talking prophetic Arrow of Dodona, I would have to buy them a thank-you gift.

“No weapons,” I muttered.

“Very well,” Terminus decided. “You may pass. And happy impending birthday, Lester.”

“I…what?”

“Move along! Next!”

There was no one behind us, but Terminus shooed us into the city, yelling at the nonexistent crowd of visitors to stop pushing and form a single line.

“Is your birthday coming up?” Frank asked as we continued. “Congratulations!”

“It shouldn’t be.” I stared at my license. “April eighth, it says here. That can’t be right. I was born on the seventh day of the seventh month. Of course, the months were different back then. Let’s see, the month of Gamelion? But that was in the wintertime—”

“How do gods celebrate, anyway?” Frank mused. “Are you seventeen now? Or four thousand and seventeen? Do you eat cake?”

He sounded hopeful about that last part, as if imagining a monstrous gold-frosted confection with seventeen Roman candles on the top.

I tried to calculate my correct day of birth. The effort made my head pound. Even when I’d had a godly memory, I hated keeping track of dates: the old lunar calendar, the Julian calendar, the Gregorian calendar, leap year, daylight savings time. Ugh. Couldn’t we just call every day *Apolloday* and be done with it?

Yet Zeus had definitely assigned me a new birthdate: April 8. Why? Seven was my sacred number. The date 4/8 had no sevens. The sum wasn’t even divisible by seven. Why would Zeus mark my birthday as four days from now?

I stopped in my tracks, as if my own legs had turned into a marble pedestal. In my dream, Caligula had insisted that his pandai finish their work by the time the blood moon rose in five days. If what I observed had happened last night…that meant there were only four days left from today, which would make doomsday April 8, Lester’s birthday.

“What is it?” Frank asked. “Why is your face gray?”

“I—I think my father left me a warning,” I said. “Or perhaps a threat? And Terminus just pointed it out to me.”

“How can your birthday be a threat?”

“I’m mortal now. Birthdays are *always* a threat.” I fought down a wave of anxiety. I wanted to turn and run, but there was nowhere to go—only forward into New Rome, to gather more unwelcome information about my impending doom.

“Lead on, Frank Zhang,” I said halfheartedly, slipping my license back in my wallet. “Perhaps Tyson and Ella will have some answers.”

New Rome…the likeliest city on earth to find Olympian gods lurking in disguise. (Followed closely by New York, then Cozumel during spring

break. Don’t judge us.)

When I was a god, I would often hover invisibly over the red-tiled rooftops, or walk the streets in mortal form, enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells of our imperial heyday.

It was not the same as ancient Rome, of course. They’d made quite a few improvements. No slavery, for one thing. Better personal hygiene, for another. Gone was the Subura—the jam-packed slum quarter with its firetrap apartments.

Nor was New Rome a sad theme-park imitation, like a mock Eiffel Tower in the middle of Las Vegas. It was a living city where modern and ancient mixed freely. Walking through the Forum, I heard conversations in a dozen languages, Latin among them. A band of musicians held a jam session with lyres, guitars, and a washboard. Children played in the fountains while adults sat nearby under trellises shaded with grape vines. Lares drifted here and there, becoming more visible in the long afternoon shadows. All manner of people mingled and chatted—one-headed, two-headed, even dog-headed *cynocephali* who grinned and panted and barked to make their points.

This was a smaller, kinder, much-improved Rome—the Rome we always thought mortals were capable of but never achieved. And, yes, of course we gods came here for nostalgia, to relive those wonderful centuries when mortals worshipped us freely across the empire, perfuming the air with burnt sacrifices.

That may sound pathetic to you—like an oldies concert cruise, pandering to over-the-hill fans of washed-up bands. But what can I say? Nostalgia is one ailment immortality can’t cure.

As we approached the Senate House, I began to see vestiges of the recent battle. Cracks in the dome glistened with silver adhesive. The walls of some buildings had been hastily replastered. As with the camp, the city streets seemed less crowded than I remembered, and every so often—when a cynocephalus barked, or a blacksmith’s hammer clanged against a piece of armor—the people nearby flinched at the noise, as if wondering whether they should seek shelter.

This was a traumatized city, trying very hard to get back to normal. And based on what I’d seen in my dreams, New Rome was about to be re-traumatized in just a few days.

“How many people did you lose?” I asked Frank.

I was afraid to hear numbers, but I felt compelled to ask.

Frank glanced around us, checking if anyone else was in earshot. We were heading up one of New Rome's many winding cobblestone streets into the residential neighborhoods.

"Hard to say," he told me. "From the legion itself, at least twenty-five. That's how many are missing from the roster. Our maximum strength is… *was* two hundred and fifty. Not that we actually have that many in camp at any given time, but still. The battle literally decimated us."

I felt as if a Lar had passed through me. Decimation, the ancient punishment for bad legions, was a grim business: every tenth soldier was killed whether they were guilty or innocent.

"I'm so sorry, Frank. I should have…"

I didn't know how to finish that sentence. I should have what? I was no longer a god. I could no longer snap my fingers and cause zombies to explode from a thousand miles away. I had never adequately appreciated such simple pleasures.

Frank pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. "It was hardest on the civilians. A lot of retired legionnaires from New Rome came out to help. They've always acted as our reserves. Anyway, that line of prophecy you mentioned: *Bodies fill the Tiber beyond count*? That didn't mean there were many bodies after the battle. It meant we couldn't count our dead, because they disappeared."

My gut wound began to seethe. "Disappeared how?"

"Some were dragged away when the undead retreated. We tried to get them all, but…" He turned up his palms. "A few got swallowed by the ground. Even Hazel couldn't explain it. Most went underwater during the fight in the Little Tiber. The naiads tried to search and recover for us. No luck."

He didn't vocalize the truly horrible thing about this news, but I imagined he was thinking it. Their dead had not simply disappeared. They would be back—as enemies.

Frank kept his gaze on the cobblestones. "I try not to dwell on it. I'm supposed to lead, stay confident, you know? But like today, when we saw Terminus…There's usually a little girl, Julia, who helps him out. She's about seven. Adorable kid."

"She wasn't there today."

"No," Frank agreed. "She's with a foster family. Her father and mother both died in the fight."

It was too much. I put my hand against the nearest wall. Another innocent little girl made to suffer, like Meg McCaffrey, when Nero killed her father…Like Georgina, when she was taken from her mothers in Indianapolis. These three monstrous Roman emperors had shattered so many lives. I *had* to put a stop to it.

Frank took my arm gently. “One foot in front of the other. That’s the only way to do it.”

I had come here to support the Romans. Instead this Roman was supporting me.

We made our way past cafés and storefronts. I tried to focus on anything positive. The grape vines were budding. The fountains still had running water. The buildings in this neighborhood were all intact.

“At least—at least the city didn’t burn,” I ventured.

Frank frowned like he didn’t see the cause for optimism. “What do you mean?”

“That other line of prophecy: *The words that memory wrought are set to fire.* That refers to Ella and Tyson’s work on the Sibylline Books, doesn’t it? The Books must be safe, since you prevented the city from burning.”

“Oh.” Frank made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh. “Yeah, funny thing about that…”

He stopped in front of a quaint-looking bookstore. Painted on the green awning was the simple word LIBRI. Racks of used hardcovers were set out on the sidewalk for browsing. Inside the window, a large orange cat sunned itself atop a stack of dictionaries.

“Prophecy lines don’t always mean what you think they do.” Frank rapped on the door: three sharp taps, two slow ones, then two fast ones.

Immediately, the door flew inward. Standing in the entrance was a bare-chested, grinning Cyclops.

“Come in!” said Tyson. “I am getting a tattoo!”

8

Tattoos! Get yours now!
Free, wherever books are sold
Also, a large cat

MY ADVICE: NEVER ENTER a place where a Cyclops gets his tattoos. The odor is memorable, like a boiling vat of ink and leather purses. Cyclops skin is much tougher than human skin, requiring superheated needles to inject the ink, hence the odious burning smell.

How did I know this? I had a long, bad history with Cyclopes.

Millennia ago, I'd killed four of my father's favorites because they had made the lightning bolt that killed my son Asclepius. (And because I couldn't kill the actual murderer who was, ahem, Zeus.) That's how I got banished to earth as a mortal the first time. The stench of burning Cyclops brought back the memory of that wonderful rampage.

Then there were the countless other times I'd run into Cyclopes over the years: fighting alongside them during the First Titan War (always with a clothespin over my nose), trying to teach them how to craft a proper bow when they had no depth perception, surprising one on the toilet in the Labyrinth during my travels with Meg and Grover. I will never get *that* image out of my head.

Mind you, I had no problem with Tyson himself. Percy Jackson had declared him a brother. After the last war against Kronos, Zeus had rewarded Tyson with the title of general and a very nice stick.

As far as Cyclopes went, Tyson was tolerable. He took up no more space than a large human. He'd never forged a lightning bolt that had killed anyone

I liked. His gentle big brown eye and his broad smile made him look almost as cuddly as Frank. Best of all, he had devoted himself to helping Ella the harpy reconstruct the lost Sibylline Books.

Reconstructing lost prophecy books is always a good way to win a prophecy god's heart.

Nevertheless, when Tyson turned to lead us into the bookstore, I had to suppress a yelp of horror. It looked like he was having the complete works of Charles Dickens engraved on his back. From his neck to halfway down his back scrolled line after line of miniature bruised purple script, interrupted only by streaks of old white scar tissue.

Next to me, Frank whispered, "Don't."

I realized I was on the verge of tears. I was having sympathy pains from the idea of so much tattooing, and from whatever abuse the poor Cyclops had suffered to get such scars. I wanted to sob, *You poor thing!* or even give the bare-chested Cyclops a hug (which would have been a first for me). Frank was warning me not to make a big deal out of Tyson's back.

I wiped my eyes and tried to compose myself.

In the middle of the store, Tyson stopped and faced us. He grinned, spreading his arms with pride. "See? Books!"

He was not lying. From the cashier's station/information desk at the center of the room, freestanding shelves radiated in all directions, crammed with tomes of every size and shape. Two ladders led to a railed balcony, also wall-to-wall books. Overstuffed reading chairs filled every available corner. Huge windows offered views of the city aqueduct and the hills beyond. The sunlight streamed in like warm honey, making the shop feel comfortable and drowsy.

It would've been the perfect place to plop down and leaf through a relaxing novel, except for that pesky smell of boiling oil and leather. There was no visible tattoo-parlor equipment, but against the back wall, under a sign that read SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, a set of thick velvet curtains seemed to provide access to a back room.

"Very nice," I said, trying not to make it sound like a question.

"Books!" Tyson repeated. "Because it's a bookstore!"

"Of course." I nodded agreeably. "Is this, um, your store?"

Tyson pouted. "No. Sort of. The owner died. In the battle. It was sad."

"Ah." I wasn't sure what to say to that. "At any rate, it's good to see you again, Tyson. You probably don't recognize me in this form, but—"

“You are Apollo!” He laughed. “You look funny now.”

Frank covered his mouth and coughed, no doubt to hide a smile. “Tyson, is Ella around? I wanted Apollo to hear what you guys discovered.”

“Ella is in the back room. She was giving me a tattoo!” He leaned toward me and lowered his voice. “Ella is pretty. But shh. She doesn’t like me saying that all the time. She gets embarrassed. Then I get embarrassed.”

“I won’t tell,” I promised. “Lead on, General Tyson.”

“General.” Tyson laughed some more. “Yes. That’s me. I bashed some heads in the war!”

He galloped away like he was riding a hobbyhorse, straight through the velvet curtains.

Part of me wanted to turn, leave, and take Frank for another cup of coffee. I dreaded what we might find on the other side of those curtains.

Then something at my feet said, *Mrow*.

The cat had found me. The enormous orange tabby, which must have eaten all the other bookstore cats to achieve its current size, pushed its head against my leg.

“It’s touching me,” I complained.

“That’s Aristophanes.” Frank smiled. “He’s harmless. Besides, you know how Romans feel about cats.”

“Yes, yes, don’t remind me.” I had never been a fan of felines. They were self-centered, smug, and thought they owned the world. In other words…All right, I’ll say it. I didn’t like the competition.

For Romans, however, cats were a symbol of freedom and independence. They were allowed to wander anywhere they wished, even inside temples. Several times over the centuries, I’d found my altar smelling like a tomcat’s new marking post.

Mrow, Aristophanes said again. His sleepy eyes, pale green as lime pulp, seemed to say, *You’re mine now, and I may pee on you later.*

“I have to go,” I told the cat. “Frank Zhang, let’s find our harpy.”

As I suspected, the special-collections room had been set up as a tattoo parlor.

Rolling bookshelves had been pushed aside, heaped with leather-bound volumes, wooden scroll cases, and clay cuneiform tablets. Dominating the center of the room, a black leather reclining chair with foldable arms

gleamed under an LED magnifying lamp. At its side stood a workstation with four humming electric steel-needle guns connected to ink hoses.

I myself had never gotten a tattoo. When I was a god, if I wanted some ink on my skin, I could simply will it into being. But this setup reminded me of something Hephaestus might try—a lunatic experiment in godly dentistry, perhaps.

In the back corner, a ladder led to a second-level balcony similar to the one in the main room. Two sleeping areas had been created up there: one a harpy's nest of straw, cloth, and shredded paper; the other a sort of cardboard fort made of old appliance boxes. I decided not to inquire.

Pacing behind the tattoo chair was Ella herself, mumbling as if having an internal argument.

Aristophanes, who had followed us inside, began shadowing the harpy, trying to butt his head against Ella's leathery bird legs. Every so often, one of her rust-colored feathers fluttered away and Aristophanes pounced on it. Ella ignored the cat completely. They seemed like a match made in Elysium.

"Fire…" Ella muttered. "Fire with…something, something…something bridge. Twice something, something…Hmm."

She seemed agitated, though I gathered that was her natural state. From what little I knew, Percy, Hazel, and Frank had discovered Ella living in Portland, Oregon's main library, subsisting on food scraps and nesting in discarded novels. Somehow, at some point, the harpy had chanced across copies of the Sibylline Books, three volumes that had been thought lost forever in a fire toward the end of the Roman Empire. (Discovering a copy would've been like finding an unknown Bessie Smith recording, or a pristine *Batman* No. 1 from 1940, except more…er, *prophecy-ish*.)

With her photographic but disjointed memory, Ella was now the sole source of those old prophecies. Percy, Hazel, and Frank had brought her to Camp Jupiter, where she could live in safety and hopefully re-create the lost books with the help of Tyson, her doting boyfriend. (Cyclops-friend? Interspecies significant other?)

Past that, Ella was an enigma wrapped in red feathers wrapped in a linen shift.

"No, no, no." She ran one hand through her luxurious swirls of red hair, ruffling it so vigorously I was afraid she might give her scalp lacerations. "Not enough words. 'Words, words, words.' *Hamlet*, act two, scene two."

She looked in good health for a former street harpy. Her humanlike face was angular but not emaciated. Her arm feathers were carefully preened. Her weight seemed about right for an avian, so she must have been getting plenty of birdseed or tacos or whatever harpies preferred to eat. Her taloned feet had shredded a well-defined path where she paced across the carpet.

"Ella, look!" Tyson announced. "Friends!"

Ella frowned, her eyes sliding off Frank and me as if we were minor annoyances—pictures hung askew on a wall.

"No," she decided. Her long fingernails clacked together. "Tyson needs more tattoos."

"Okay!" Tyson grinned as if this were fantastic news. He bounded over to the reclining chair.

"Wait," I pleaded. It was bad enough to *smell* the tattoos. If I saw them being made, I was sure I would puke all over Aristophanes. "Ella, before you start, could you please explain what's going on?"

"'What's Going On,'" Ella said. "Marvin Gaye, 1971."

"Yes, I know," I said. "I helped write that song."

"No." Ella shook her head. "Written by Renaldo Benson, Al Cleveland, and Marvin Gaye; inspired by an incident of police brutality."

Frank smirked at me. "You can't argue with the harpy."

"No," Ella agreed. "You can't."

She scuttled over and studied me more carefully, sniffing at my bandaged belly, poking my chest. Her feathers glistened like rust in the rain. "Apollo," she said. "You're all wrong, though. Wrong body. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel, 1956."

I did not like being compared to a black-and-white horror film, but I'd just been told not to argue with the harpy.

Meanwhile, Tyson adjusted the tattoo chair into a flat bed. He lay on his stomach, the recently inked purple lines of script rippling across his scarred, muscular back.

"Ready!" he announced.

The obvious finally dawned on me.

"*The words that memory wrought are set to fire*," I recalled. "You're rewriting the Sibylline Books on Tyson with hot needles. That's what the prophecy meant."

"Yep." Ella poked my love handles as if assessing them for a writing surface. "Hmm. Nope. Too flabby."

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

Frank shifted his weight, suddenly looking self-conscious about his own writing surfaces. “Ella says it’s the only way she can record the words in the right order,” he explained. “On living skin.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. In the last few months, I’d sorted out prophecies by listening to the insane voices of trees, hallucinating in a dark cave, and racing across a fiery crossword puzzle. By comparison, assembling a manuscript on a Cyclops’s back sounded downright civilized.

“But…how far have you gotten?” I asked.

“The first lumbar,” Ella said.

She showed no sign that she was joking.

Facedown on his torture bed, Tyson paddled his feet excitedly. “READY! Oh, boy! Tattoos tickle!”

“Ella,” I tried again, “what I mean is: Have you found anything *useful* for us concerning—oh, I don’t know—threats in the next four days? Frank said you had a lead?”

“Yep, found the tomb.” She poked my love handles again. “Death, death, death. Lots of death.”

9

Dearly beloved,
We are gathered here because
Hera stinks. Amen.

IF THERE IS ANYTHING worse than hearing *Death, death, death,* it's hearing those words while having your flab poked.

"Can you be more specific?"

I actually wanted to ask: *Can you make all of this go away, and can you also stop poking me?* But I doubted I would get either wish.

"Cross references," Ella said.

"Sorry?"

"Tarquin's tomb," she said. "The Burning Maze words. Frank told me: *Apollo faces death in Tarquin's tomb unless the doorway to the soundless god is opened by Bellona's daughter."*

"I know the prophecy," I said. "I sort of wish people would stop repeating it. What exactly—?"

"Cross-referenced *Tarquin* and *Bellona* and *soundless god* with Tyson's index."

I turned to Frank, who seemed to be the only other comprehensible person in the room. "Tyson has an index?"

Frank shrugged. "He wouldn't be much of a reference book without an index."

"On the back of my thigh!" Tyson called, still happily kicking his feet, waiting to be engraved with red-hot needles. "Want to see?"

"No! Gods, no. So you cross-referenced—"

“Yep, yep,” said Ella. “No results for *Bellona* or the *soundless god*. Hmm.” She tapped the sides of her head. “Need more words for those. But *Tarquin’s tomb*. Yep. Found a line.”

She scuttled to the tattoo chair, Aristophanes trotting close behind, swatting at her wings. Ella tapped Tyson’s shoulder blade. “Here.”

Tyson giggled.

“A wildcat near the spinning lights,” Ella read aloud. *“The tomb of Tarquin with horses bright. To open his door, two-fifty-four.”*

Mrow, said Aristophanes.

“No, Aristophanes,” Ella said, her tone softening, “you are not a wildcat.”

The beast purred like a chainsaw.

I waited for more prophecy. Most of the Sibylline Books read like *The Joy of Cooking*, with sacrificial recipes to placate the gods in the event of certain catastrophes. Plague of locusts ruining your crops? Try the Ceres soufflé with loaves of honey bread roasted over her altar for three days. Earthquake destroying the city? When Neptune comes home tonight, surprise him with three black bulls basted in holy oil and burned in a fire pit with sprigs of rosemary!

But Ella seemed to be done reading.

“Frank,” I said, “did that make any sense to you?”

He frowned. “I thought *you* would understand it.”

When would people realize that just because I was the god of prophecy didn’t mean I understood prophecies? I was also the god of poetry. Did I understand the metaphors in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*? No.

“Ella,” I said, “could those lines describe a location?”

“Yep, yep. Close by, probably. But only to go in. Look around. Find out the right things and leave. Not to kill Tarquinius Superbus. Nope. He’s much too dead to kill. For that, hmm…Need more words.”

Frank Zhang picked at the mural-crown badge on his chest. “Tarquinius Superbus. The last king of Rome. He was considered a myth even back in Imperial Roman times. His tomb was never discovered. Why would he be…?” He gestured around us.

“In our neck of the woods?” I finished. “Probably the same reason Mount Olympus is hovering above New York, or Camp Jupiter is in the Bay Area.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Frank admitted. “Still, if the tomb of a Roman king was near Camp Jupiter, why would we just be learning about it now? Why the attack of the undead?”

I didn’t have a ready answer. I’d been so fixated on Caligula and Commodus, I hadn’t given much thought to Tarquinius Superbus. As evil as he might have been, Tarquin had been a minor-league player compared to the emperors. Nor did I understand why a semilegendary, barbaric, apparently undead Roman king would have joined forces with the Triumvirate.

Some distant memory tickled at the base of my skull…. It couldn’t be a coincidence that Tarquin would make himself known just as Ella and Tyson were reconstructing the Sibylline Books.

I remembered my dream of the purple-eyed entity, the deep voice that had possessed the eurynomos in the tunnel: *You of all people should understand the fragile boundary between life and death.*

The cut across my stomach throbbed. Just once, for variety, I wished I could encounter a tomb where the occupants were actually dead.

“So, Ella,” I said, “you suggest we find this tomb.”

“Yep. Go in the tomb. *Tomb Raider* for PC, Playstation, and Sega Saturn, 1996. *Tombs of Atuan,* Ursula Le Guin, Atheneum Press, 1971.”

I barely noticed the extraneous information this time. If I stayed here much longer, I’d probably start speaking in Ella-ese, too, spouting random Wikipedia references after every sentence. I really needed to leave before that happened.

“But we only go in to look around,” I said. “To find out—”

“The right things. Yep, yep.”

“And then?”

“Come back alive. ‘Stayin’ Alive,’ the Bee Gees, second single, *Saturday Night Fever* motion picture sound track, 1977.”

“Right. And…you’re sure there’s no more information in the Cyclops index that might actually be, oh, helpful?”

“Hmm.” Ella stared at Frank, then trotted over and sniffed his face. “Firewood. Something. No. That’s for later.”

Frank couldn’t have looked more like a cornered animal if he’d actually turned into one. “Um, Ella? We don’t talk about the firewood.”

That reminded me of another reason I liked Frank Zhang. He, too, was a member of the *I Hate Hera* club. In Frank’s case, Hera had inexplicably tied

his life force to a small piece of wood, which I'd heard Frank now carried around with him at all times. If the wood burned up, so did Frank. Such a typical controlling Hera thing to do: *I love you and you're my special hero, and also here's a stick—when it burns you die HA-HA-HA-HA-HA.* I disliked that woman.

Ella ruffled her feathers, providing Aristophanes with lots of new targets to play with. "Fire with…something, something bridge. Twice something, something…Hmm, nope. That's later. Need more words. Tyson needs a tattoo."

"Yay!" said Tyson. "Can you also do a picture of Rainbow? He's my friend! He's a fish pony!"

"A rainbow is white light," Ella said. "Refracted through water droplets."

"Also a fish pony!" Tyson said.

"Hmph," said Ella.

I got the feeling I had just witnessed the closest the harpy and Cyclops ever came to having an argument.

"You two can go." Ella brushed us away. "Come back tomorrow. Maybe three days. 'Eight Days a Week,' Beatles. First UK release, 1964. Not sure yet."

I was about to protest that we had only four days before Caligula's yachts arrived and Camp Jupiter suffered another onslaught of destruction, but Frank stopped me with a touch on the arm. "We should go. Let her work. It's almost time for evening muster anyway."

After the mention of firewood, I got the feeling he would have used any faun-level excuse to get out of that bookstore.

My last glimpse of the special-collections room was Ella holding her tattoo gun, etching steaming words on Tyson's back while the Cyclops giggled, "IT TICKLES!" and Aristophanes used the harpy's rough leather legs as scratching posts.

Some images, like Cyclops tattoos, are permanent once burned onto your brain.

Frank hustled us back to camp as fast as my wounded gut would tolerate.

I wanted to ask him about Ella's comments, but Frank wasn't in a talkative mood. Every so often his hand strayed to the side of his belt, where a cloth pouch hung tucked behind his scabbard. I hadn't noticed it before,

but I assumed this was where he stored his Hera-Cursed Life-Ending Souvenir™.

Or perhaps Frank was somber because he knew what awaited us at evening muster.

The legion had assembled for the funeral procession.

At the head of the column stood Hannibal, the legion's elephant, decked in Kevlar and black flowers. Harnessed behind him was a wagon with Jason's coffin, draped in purple and gold. Four of the cohorts had fallen into line behind the coffin, with purple Lares shifting in and out of their ranks. The Fifth Cohort, Jason's original unit, served as honor guards and torch bearers on either side of the wagon. Standing with them, between Hazel and Lavinia, was Meg McCaffrey. She frowned when she saw me and mouthed, *You're late.*

Frank jogged over to join Reyna, who was waiting at Hannibal's shoulder.

The senior praetor looked drained and weary, as if she'd spent the last few hours weeping in private and then pulled herself back together as best she could. Next to her stood the legion's standard bearer, holding aloft the eagle of the Twelfth.

Being close to the eagle made my hairs stand on end. The golden icon reeked of Jupiter's power. The air around it crackled with energy.

"Apollo." Reyna's tone was formal, her eyes like empty wells. "Are you prepared?"

"For…?" The question died in my throat.

Everyone was staring at me expectantly. Did they want another song?

No. Of course. The legion had no high priest, no pontifex maximus. Their former augur, my descendant Octavian, had died in the battle against Gaia. (Which I had a hard time feeling sad about, but that's another story.) Jason would've been the logical next choice to officiate, but he was our guest of honor. That meant that I, as a former god, was the ranking spiritual authority. I would be expected to lead the funeral rites.

Romans were all about proper etiquette. I couldn't excuse myself without that being taken as a bad omen. Besides, I owed Jason my best, even if that was a sad Lester Papadopoulos version of my best.

I tried to remember the correct Roman invocation.

Dearly beloved…? No.

Why is this night different…? No.

Aha.

"Come, my friends," I said. "Let us escort our brother to his final feast."

I suppose I did all right. No one looked scandalized. I turned and led the way out of the fort, the entire legion following in eerie silence.

Along the road to Temple Hill, I had a few moments of panic. What if I led the procession in the wrong direction? What if we ended up in the parking lot of an Oakland Safeway?

The golden eagle of the Twelfth loomed over my shoulder, charging the air with ozone. I imagined Jupiter speaking through its crackle and hum, like a voice over shortwave radio: *YOUR FAULT. YOUR PUNISHMENT.*

Back in January, when I'd fallen to earth, those words had seemed horribly unfair. Now, as I led Jason Grace to his final resting place, I *believed* them. So much of what had happened *was* my fault. So much of it could never be made right.

Jason had exacted a promise from me: *When you're a god again, remember. Remember what it's like to be human.*

I meant to keep that promise, if I survived long enough. But in the meantime, there were more pressing ways I needed to honor Jason: by protecting Camp Jupiter, defeating the Triumvirate, and, according to Ella, descending into the tomb of an undead king.

Ella's words rattled around in my head: *A wildcat near the spinning lights. The tomb of Tarquin with horses bright. To open his door, two-fifty-four.*

Even for a prophecy, the lines seemed like gibberish.

The Sibyl of Cumae had always been vague and verbose. She refused to take editorial direction. She'd written nine entire volumes of Sibylline Books—honestly, who needs *nine books* to finish a series? I'd secretly felt vindicated when she'd been unable to sell them to the Romans until she whittled them down to a trilogy. The other six volumes had gone straight into the fire when…

I froze.

Behind me, the procession creaked and shuffled to a halt.

"Apollo?" Reyna whispered.

I shouldn't stop. I was officiating Jason's funeral. I couldn't fall down, roll into a ball, and cry. That would be a definite no-no. But, Jupiter's gym shorts, why did my brain insist on remembering important facts at such inconvenient times?

Of course Tarquin was connected to the Sibylline Books. Of course he would choose now to show himself, and send an army of undead against Camp Jupiter. And the Sibyl of Cumae herself…Was it possible—?

"Apollo," Reyna said again, more insistently.

"I'm fine," I lied.

One problem at a time. Jason Grace deserved my full attention. I forced down my turbulent thoughts and kept walking.

When I reached Temple Hill, it was obvious where to go. At the base of Jupiter's temple stood an elaborate wooden pyre. At each corner, an honor guard waited with a blazing torch. Jason's coffin would burn in the shadow of our father's temple. That seemed bitterly appropriate.

The legion's cohorts fanned out in a semicircle around the pyre, the Lares in their ranks glowing like birthday candles. The Fifth Cohort unloaded Jason's coffin and bore it to the platform. Hannibal and his funeral cart were led away.

Behind the legion, at the periphery of the torchlight, *aura* wind spirits swirled about, setting up folding tables and black tablecloths. Others flew in with drink pitchers, stacks of plates, and baskets of food. No Roman funeral would be complete without a final meal for the departed. Only after the food was shared by the mourners would the Romans consider Jason's spirit safely on its way to the Underworld—immune from indignities like becoming a restless ghost or a zombie.

While the legionnaires got settled, Reyna and Frank joined me at the pyre.

"You had me worried," Reyna said. "Is your wound still bothering you?"

"It's getting better," I said, though I might have been trying to assure myself more than her. Also, why did she have to look so beautiful in the firelight?

"We'll have the healers look at it again," Frank promised. "Why did you stop in the road?"

"Just…remembered something. Tell you later. I don't suppose you guys had any luck notifying Jason's family? Thalia?"

They exchanged frustrated looks.

"We tried, of course," Reyna said. "Thalia's the only earthly family he had. But with the communications problems…"

I nodded, unsurprised. One of the more annoying things the Triumvirate had done was to shut down all forms of magical communication used by

demigods. Iris-messages failed. Letters sent by wind spirits never arrived. Even mortal technology—which demigods tried to avoid anyway because it attracted monsters—now wouldn't work for them at all. How the emperors had managed this, I had no idea.

"I wish we could wait for Thalia," I said, watching as the last of the Fifth Cohort pallbearers climbed down from the pyre.

"Me too," Reyna agreed. "But—"

"I know," I said.

Roman funeral rites were meant to be performed as soon as possible. Cremation was necessary to send Jason's spirit along. It would allow the community to grieve and heal…or at least turn our attention to the next threat.

"Let's begin," I said.

Reyna and Frank rejoined the front line.

I began to speak, the Latin ritual verses pouring out of me. I chanted from instinct, barely aware of the words' meanings. I had already praised Jason with my song. That had been deeply personal. This was just a necessary formality.

In some corner of my mind, I wondered if this was how mortals felt when they used to pray to me. Perhaps their devotions had been nothing but muscle memory, reciting by rote while their minds drifted elsewhere, uninterested in my glory. I found the idea strangely…understandable. Now that I was a mortal, why should I not practice nonviolent resistance against the gods, too?

I finished my benediction.

I gestured for the aurae to distribute the feast, to place the first serving on Jason's coffin so he could symbolically share a last meal with his brethren in the mortal world. Once that happened, and the pyre was lit, Jason's soul would cross the Styx—so Roman tradition said.

Before the torches could be set to the wood, a plaintive howl echoed in the distance. Then another, much closer. An uneasy ripple passed through the assembled demigods. Their expressions weren't alarmed, exactly, but definitely surprised, as if they hadn't planned on extra guests. Hannibal grunted and stamped.

At the edges of our gathering, gray wolves emerged from the gloom—dozens of huge beasts, keening for the death of Jason, a member of their pack.

Directly behind the pyre, on the raised steps of Jupiter's temple, the largest wolf appeared, her silvery hide glowing in the torchlight.

I felt the legion holding its collective breath. No one knelt. When facing Lupa, the wolf goddess, guardian spirit of Rome, you don't kneel or show any sign of weakness. Instead we stood respectfully, holding our ground, as the pack bayed around us.

At last, Lupa fixed me with her lamp-yellow eyes. With a curl of her lip, she gave me a simple order: *Come.*

Then she turned and paced into the darkness of the temple.

Reyna approached me.

"Looks like the wolf goddess wants to have a private word." She frowned with concern. "We'll get the feast started. You go ahead. Hopefully Lupa isn't angry. Or hungry."

10

Sing it with me: Who's
Afraid of the Big Good Wolf?
Me. That would be me.

LUPA WAS BOTH ANGRY *and* hungry.

I didn't claim to be fluent in Wolf, but I'd spent enough time around my sister's pack to understand the basics. Feelings were the easiest to read. Lupa, like all her kind, spoke in a combination of glances, snarls, ear twitches, postures, and pheromones. It was quite an elegant language, though not well-suited to rhyming couplets. Believe me, I'd tried. Nothing rhymes with *grr-rrr-row-rrr.*

Lupa was trembling with fury over Jason's death. The ketones on her breath indicated she had not eaten in days. The anger made her hungry. The hunger made her angry. And her twitching nostrils told her that I was the nearest, most convenient sack of mortal meat.

Nevertheless, I followed her into Jupiter's massive temple. I had little choice.

Ringing the open-air pavilion, columns the size of redwoods supported a domed, gilded ceiling. The floor was a colorful mosaic of Latin inscriptions: prophecies, memorials, dire warnings to praise Jupiter or face his lightning. In the center, behind a marble altar, rose a massive golden statue of Dad himself: Jupiter Optimus Maximus, draped in a purple silk toga big enough to be a ship's sail. He looked stern, wise, and paternal, though he was only one of those in real life.

Seeing him tower above me, lightning bolt raised, I had to fight the urge to cower and plead. I knew it was only a statue, but if you've ever been traumatized by someone, you'll understand. It doesn't take much to trigger those old fears: a look, a sound, a familiar situation. Or a fifty-foot-tall golden statue of your abuser—that does the trick.

Lupa stood before the altar. Mist shrouded her fur as if she were off-gassing quicksilver.

It is your time, she told me.

Or something like that. Her gestures conveyed expectation and urgency. She wanted me to do something. Her scent told me she wasn't sure I was capable of it.

I swallowed dryly, which in itself was Wolf for *I'm scared*. No doubt Lupa already smelled my fear. It wasn't possible to lie in Lupa's language. Threaten, bully, cajole…yes. But not outright lie.

"My time," I said. "For what, exactly?"

She nipped the air in annoyance. *To be Apollo. The pack needs you.*

I wanted to scream *I've been* trying *to be Apollo! It's not that easy!*

But I restrained my body language from broadcasting that message.

Talking face-to-face with any god is dangerous business. I was out of practice. True, I'd seen Britomartis back in Indianapolis, but she didn't count. She liked torturing me too much to want to kill me. With Lupa, though…I had to be careful.

Even when I'd been a god myself, I'd never been able to get a good read on the Wolf Mother. She didn't hang out with the Olympians. She never came to the family Saturnalia dinners. Not once had she attended our monthly book group, even when we discussed *Dances with Wolves*.

"Fine," I relented. "I know what you mean. The last lines from the Dark Prophecy. I've reached the Tiber alive, et cetera, et cetera. Now I am supposed to 'jive.' I assume that entails more than dancing and snapping my fingers?"

Lupa's stomach growled. The more I talked, the tastier I smelled.

The pack is weak, she signaled with a glance toward the funeral pyre. *Too many have died. When the enemy surrounds this place, you must show strength. You must summon help.*

I tried to suppress another wolfish display of irritation. Lupa was a goddess. This was her city, her camp. She had a pack of supernatural wolves at her command. Why couldn't *she* help?

But, of course, I knew the answer. Wolves are not frontline fighters. They are hunters who attack only when they have overwhelming numbers. Lupa expected her Romans to solve their own problems. To be self-sufficient or die. She would advise. She would teach and guide and warn. But she would not fight their battles. *Our* battles.

Which made me wonder why she was telling me to summon help. And *what* help?

My expression and body language must have conveyed the question.

She flicked her ears. *North. Scout the tomb. Find answers. That is the first step.*

Outside, at the base of the temple, the funeral pyre crackled and roared. Smoke drifted through the open rotunda, buffeting the statue of Jupiter. I hoped, somewhere up on Mount Olympus, Dad's divine sinuses were suffering.

"Tarquinius Superbus," I said. "He's the one who sent the undead. He'll attack again at the blood moon."

Lupa's nostrils twitched in confirmation. *His stench is on you. Be careful in his tomb. The emperors were foolish to call him forth.*

Emperor was a difficult concept to express in Wolf. The term for it could mean *alpha wolf, pack leader,* or *submit to me now before I rip out your jugular*. I was fairly sure I interpreted Lupa's meaning correctly. Her pheromones read *danger, disgust, apprehension, outrage, more danger.*

I put a hand over my bandaged abdomen. I was getting better…wasn't I? I'd been slathered with enough Lemurian spice and unicorn-horn shavings to kill a zombie mastodon. But I didn't like Lupa's worried look, or the idea of anyone's stench being on me, especially not an undead king's.

"Once I explore this tomb," I said, "and get out alive…what then?"

The way will be clearer. To defeat the great silence. Then summon help. Without this, the pack will die.

I was less sure I comprehended those lines. "Defeat the silence. You mean the soundless god? The doorway that Reyna is supposed to open?"

Her response was frustratingly ambivalent. It could have meant *Yes and no,* or *Sort of,* or *Why are you so dense?*

I stared up at Large Golden Dad.

Zeus had thrown me into the middle of all this trouble. He'd stripped me of my power, then kicked me to the earth to free the Oracles, defeat the emperors, and—Oh, wait! I got a bonus undead king and a silent god, too! I

hoped the soot from the funeral pyre was really annoying Jupiter. I wanted to climb up his legs and finger-write across his chest *WASH ME!*

I closed my eyes. This probably wasn't the wisest thing to do when facing a giant wolf, but I had too many half-formed ideas swirling around in my head. I thought about the Sibylline Books, the various prescriptions they contained for warding off disasters. I considered what Lupa might mean by *the great silence.* And summoning help.

My eyes snapped open. "Help. As in godly help. You mean if I survive the tomb and—and defeat the soundless whatever-it-is, I might be able to summon *godly* help?"

Lupa made a rumbling sound deep in her chest. *Finally, he understands. This will be the beginning. The first step to rejoining your own pack.*

My heart *ka-thumped* like it was falling down a flight of stairs. Lupa's message seemed too good to be true. I could contact my fellow Olympians, despite Zeus's standing orders that they shun me while I was human. I might even be able to invoke their aid to save Camp Jupiter. Suddenly, I really *did* feel better. My gut didn't hurt. My nerves tingled with a sensation I hadn't felt for so long I almost didn't recognize it: hope.

Beware. Lupa brought me back to reality with a low snarl. *The way is hard. You will face more sacrifices. Death. Blood.*

"No." I met her eyes—a dangerous sign of challenge that surprised me as much as it did her. "No, I will succeed. I won't allow any more losses. There has to be a way."

I managed maybe three seconds of eye contact before looking away.

Lupa sniffed—a dismissive noise like *Of course I won,* but I thought I detected a hint of grudging approval, too. It dawned on me that Lupa appreciated my bluster and determination, even if she didn't believe I was capable of doing what I said. Maybe *especially* because she didn't believe it.

Rejoin the feast, she ordered. *Tell them you have my blessing. Continue to act strong. It is how we start.*

I studied the old prophecies set in the floor mosaic. I had lost friends to the Triumvirate. I had suffered. But I realized that Lupa had suffered, too. Her Roman children had been decimated. She carried the pain of all their deaths. Yet she had to act strong, even as her pack faced possible extinction.

You couldn't lie in Wolf. But you could bluff. Sometimes you *had* to bluff to keep a grieving pack together. What do mortals say? *Fake it till you make it?* That is a very wolfish philosophy.

“Thank you.” I looked up, but Lupa was gone. Nothing remained except silver mist, blending with the smoke from Jason’s pyre.

I gave Reyna and Frank the simplest version: I had received the wolf goddess’s blessing. I promised to tell them more the next day, once I’d had time to make sense of it. Meanwhile, I trusted that word would spread among the legion about Lupa giving me guidance. That would be enough for now. These demigods needed all the reassurance they could get.

As the pyre burned, Frank and Hazel stood hand in hand, keeping vigil as Jason made his final voyage. I sat on a funeral picnic blanket with Meg, who ate everything in sight and went on and on about her excellent afternoon tending unicorns with Lavinia. Meg boasted that Lavinia had even let her clean out the stables.

“She pulled a Tom Sawyer on you,” I observed.

Meg frowned, her mouth filled with hamburger. “Whad’ya mean?”

“Nothing. You were saying, about unicorn poop?”

I tried to eat my dinner, but despite how hungry I was, the food tasted like dust.

When the pyre’s last embers died and the wind spirits cleared away the remnants of the feast, we followed the legionnaires back to camp.

Up in Bombilo’s spare room, I lay on my cot and studied the cracks in the ceiling. I imagined they were lines of tattooed script across a Cyclops’s back. If I stared at them long enough, maybe they would start to make sense, or at least I could find the index.

Meg threw a shoe at me. “You gotta rest. Tomorrow’s the senate meeting.”

I brushed her red high-top off my chest. “You’re not asleep, either.”

“Yeah, but you’ll have to speak. They’ll wanna hear your plan.”

“My *plan*?”

“You know, like an oration. Inspire them and stuff. Convince them what to do. They’ll vote on it and everything.”

“One afternoon in the unicorn stables, and you’re an expert on Roman senatorial proceedings.”

“Lavinia told me.” Meg sounded positively smug about it. She lay on her cot, tossing her other high-top in the air and catching it again. How she managed this without her glasses on, I had no idea.

Minus the rhinestone cat-eye frames, her face looked older, her eyes darker and more serious. I would have even called her mature, had she not come back from her day at the stables wearing a glittery green T-shirt that read VNICORNES IMPERANT!

"What if I don't have a plan?" I asked.

I expected Meg to throw her other shoe at me. Instead she said, "You do."

"I do?"

"Yep. You might not have it all put together yet, but you will by tomorrow."

I couldn't tell if she was giving me an order, or expressing faith in me, or just vastly underestimating the dangers we faced.

Continue to act strong, Lupa had told me. *It is how we start.*

"Okay," I said tentatively. "Well, for starters, I was thinking that we could—"

"Not now! Tomorrow. I don't want spoilers."

Ah. *There* was the Meg I knew and tolerated.

"What is it with you and spoilers?" I asked.

"I hate them."

"I'm trying to strategize with y—"

"Nope."

"Talking through my ideas—"

"Nope." She tossed aside her shoe, put a pillow over her head, and commanded in a muffled voice: "Go to sleep!"

Against a direct order, I had no chance. Weariness washed over me, and my eyelids crashed shut.

11

Dirt and bubble gum
Lavinia brought enough
For the whole senate

HOW DO YOU TELL a dream from a nightmare?

If it involves a book burning, it's probably a nightmare.

I found myself in the Roman senate room—not the grand, famous chamber of the republic or the empire, but the *old* senate room of the Roman kingdom. The mudbrick walls were painted slapdash white and red. Straw covered the filthy floor. Fires from iron braziers billowed soot and smoke, darkening the plaster ceiling.

No fine marble here. No exotic silk or imperial purple grandeur. This was Rome in its oldest, rawest form: all hunger and viciousness. The royal guards wore cured leather armor over sweaty tunics. Their black iron spears were crudely hammered, their helmets stitched of wolf hide. Enslaved women knelt at the foot of the throne, which was a rough-hewn slab of rock covered with furs. Lining either side of the room were crude wooden benches—the bleachers for the senators, who sat more like prisoners or spectators than powerful politicians. In this era, senators had only one true power: to vote for a new king when the old one died. Otherwise, they were expected to applaud or shut up as required.

On the throne sat Lucius Tarquinius Superbus—seventh king of Rome, murderer, schemer, slave-driver, and all-around swell guy. His face was like wet porcelain cut with a steak knife—a wide glistening mouth pulled into a lopsided scowl; cheekbones too pronounced; a nose broken and healed in an

ugly zigzag; heavy-lidded, suspicious eyes; and long, stringy hair that looked like drizzled clay.

Just a few years before, when he ascended the throne, Tarquin had been praised for his manly good looks and his physical strength. He'd dazzled the senators with flattery and gifts, then plopped himself onto his father-in-law's throne and persuaded the senate to confirm him as the new king.

When the old king rushed in to protest that he was, you know, still very much alive, Tarquin picked him up like a sack of turnips, carried him outside, and threw him into the street, where the old king's daughter, Tarquin's wife, ran over her unfortunate dad with her chariot, splattering the wheels with his blood.

A lovely start to a lovely reign.

Now Tarquin wore his years heavily. He'd grown hunched and thick, as if all the building projects he'd forced on his people had actually been heaped on his own shoulders. He wore the hide of a wolf for a cloak. His robes were such a dark mottled pink, it was impossible to tell if they'd once been red and then spattered with bleach, or had once been white and spattered with blood.

Aside from the guards, the only person standing in the room was an old woman facing the throne. Her rose-colored hooded cloak, her hulking frame, and her stooped back made her look like a mocking reflection of the king himself: the *Saturday Night Live* version of Tarquin. In the crook of one arm she held a stack of six leather-bound volumes, each the size of a folded shirt and just as floppy.

The king scowled at her. "You're back. Why?"

"To offer you the same deal as before."

The woman's voice was husky, as if she'd been shouting. When she pulled down her hood, her stringy gray hair and haggard face made her look even more like Tarquin's twin sister. But she was not. She was the Cumaean Sibyl.

Seeing her again, my heart twisted. She had once been a lovely young woman—bright, strong-willed, passionate about her prophetic work. She had wanted to change the world. Then things between us soured…and I had changed *her* instead.

Her appearance was only the beginning of the curse I had set on her. It would get much, much worse as the centuries progressed. How had I put this

out of mind? How could I have been so cruel? The guilt for what I'd done burned worse than any ghoul scratch.

Tarquin shifted on his throne. He tried for a laugh, but the sound came out more like a bark of alarm. "You must be insane, woman. Your original price would have bankrupted my kingdom, and that was when you had *nine* books. You burned three of them, and now you come back to offer me only six, for the same exorbitant sum?"

The woman held out the books, one hand on top as if preparing to say an oath. "Knowledge is expensive, King of Rome. The less there is, the more it is worth. Be glad I am not charging you double."

"Oh, I see! I should be *grateful,* then." The king looked at his captive audience of senators for support. That was their cue to laugh and jeer at the woman. None did. They looked more afraid of the Sibyl than of the king.

"I expect no gratitude from the likes of you," the Sibyl rasped. "But you should act in your own self-interest, and in the interest of your kingdom. I offer knowledge of the future…how to avert disaster, how to summon the help of the gods, how to make Rome a great empire. All that knowledge is here. At least…six volumes of it remain."

"Ridiculous!" snapped the king. "I should have you executed for your disrespect!"

"If only that were possible." The Sibyl's voice was as bitter and calm as an arctic morning. "Do you refuse my offer, then?"

"I am high priest as well as king!" cried Tarquin. "Only *I* decide how to appease the gods! I don't need—"

The Sibyl took the top three books off the stack and casually threw them into the nearest brazier. The volumes blazed immediately, as if they'd been written in kerosene on sheets of rice paper. In a single great roar, they were gone.

The guards gripped their spears. The senators muttered and shifted on their seats. Perhaps they could feel what *I* could feel—a cosmic sigh of anguish, the exhale of destiny as so many volumes of prophetic knowledge vanished from the world, casting a shadow across the future, plunging generations into darkness.

How could the Sibyl do it? Why?

Perhaps it was her way of taking revenge on me. I'd criticized her for writing so many volumes, for not letting me oversee her work. But by the time she wrote the Sibylline Books, I had been angry at her for different

reasons. My curse had already been set. Our relationship was beyond repair. By burning her own books, she was spitting on my criticism, on the prophetic gift I had given her, and on the too-high price she had paid to be my Sibyl.

Or perhaps she was motivated by something other than bitterness. Perhaps she had a reason for challenging Tarquin as she did and exacting such a high penalty for his stubbornness.

"Last chance," she told the king. "I offer you three books of prophecy for the same price as before."

"For the same—" The king choked on his rage.

I could see how much he wanted to refuse. He wanted to scream obscenities at the Sibyl and order his guards to impale her on the spot.

But his senators were shifting and whispering uneasily. His guards' faces were pale with fear. His enslaved women were doing their best to hide behind the dais.

Romans were a superstitious people.

Tarquin knew this.

As high priest, he was responsible for protecting his subjects by interceding with the gods. Under *no* circumstances was he supposed to make the gods angry. This old woman was offering him prophetic knowledge to help his kingdom. The crowd in the throne room could *sense* her power, her closeness to the divine.

If Tarquin allowed her to burn those last books, if he threw away her offer…it might not be the Sibyl whom his guards decided to impale.

"Well?" the Sibyl prompted, holding her three remaining volumes close to the flames.

Tarquin swallowed back his anger. Through clenched teeth, he forced out the words: "I agree to your terms."

"Good," said the Sibyl, no visible relief or disappointment on her face. "Let payment be brought to the Pomerian Line. Once I have it, you will have the Books."

The Sibyl disappeared in a flash of blue light. My dream dissolved with her.

"Put on your sheet." Meg threw a toga in my face, which was not the nicest way to be woken up.

I blinked, still groggy, the smell of smoke, moldy straw, and sweaty Romans lingering in my nostrils. “A toga? But I’m not a senator.”

“You’re honorary, because you used to be a god or whatever.” Meg pouted. “*I* don’t get to wear a sheet.”

I had a horrible mental image of Meg in a traffic-light-colored toga, gardening seeds spilling from the folds of the cloth. She would just have to make do with her glittery unicorn T-shirt.

Bombilo gave me his usual *Good morning* glare when I came downstairs to appropriate the café bathroom. I washed up, then changed my bandages with a kit the healers had thoughtfully left in our room. The ghoul scratch looked no worse, but it was still puckered and angry red. It still burned. That was normal, right? I tried to convince myself it was. As they say, doctor gods make the worst patient gods.

I got dressed, trying to remember how to fold a toga, and mulled over the things I’d learned from my dream. Number one: I was a terrible person who ruined lives. Number two: There was not a single bad thing I’d done in the last four thousand years that was *not* going to come back and bite me in the *clunis*, and I was beginning to think I deserved it.

The Cumaean Sibyl. Oh, Apollo, what had you been *thinking*?

Alas, I knew what I’d been thinking—that she was a pretty young woman I wanted to get with, despite the fact that she was my Sibyl. Then she’d outsmarted me, and being the bad loser that I was, I had cursed her.

No wonder I was now paying the price: tracking down the evil Roman king to whom she’d once sold her Sibylline Books. If Tarquin was still clinging to some horrible undead existence, could the Cumaean Sibyl be alive as well? I shuddered to think what she might be like after all these centuries, and how much her hatred for me would have grown.

First things first: I had to tell the senate my marvelous plan to make things right and save us all. Did I have a marvelous plan? Shockingly, maybe. Or at least the beginnings of a marvelous plan. The marvelous index of one.

On our way out, Meg and I grabbed Lemurian-spice lattes and a couple of blueberry muffins—because Meg clearly needed more sugar and caffeine—then we joined the loose procession of demigods heading for the city.

By the time we got to the Senate House, everyone was taking their seats. Flanking the rostrum, Praetors Reyna and Frank were arrayed in their finest gold and purple. The first row of benches was occupied by the camp’s ten

senators—each in a white toga trimmed in purple—along with the senior-most veterans, those with accessibility needs, and Ella and Tyson. Ella fidgeted, doing her best to avoid brushing shoulders with the senator on her left. Tyson grinned at the Lar on his right, wriggling his fingers inside the ghost's vaporous rib cage.

Behind them, the semicircle of tiered seats was packed to overflowing with legionnaires, Lares, retired veterans, and other citizens of New Rome. I hadn't seen a lecture hall this crowded since Charles Dickens's 1867 Second American Tour. (Great show. I still have the autographed T-shirt framed in my bedroom in the Palace of the Sun.)

I thought I should sit in front, being an honorary wearer of bed linens, but there was simply no room. Then I spotted Lavinia (thank you, pink hair) waving at us from the back row. She patted the bench next to her, indicating that she'd saved us seats. A thoughtful gesture. Or maybe she wanted something.

Once Meg and I had settled on either side of her, Lavinia gave Meg the supersecret Unicorn Sisterhood fist bump, then turned and ribbed me with her sharp elbow. "So, you're really Apollo, after all! You must know my mom."

"I—what?"

Her eyebrows were extra distracting today. The dark roots had started to grow out under the pink dye, which made them seem to hover slightly off center, as if they were about to float off her face.

"My mom?" she repeated, popping her bubble gum. "Terpsichore?"

"The—the Muse of Dance. Are you asking me if she's your mother, or if I know her?"

"Of course she's my mother."

"Of course I know her."

"Well, then!" Lavinia drummed a riff on her knees, as if to prove she had a dancer's rhythm despite being so gangly. "I wanna hear the dirt!"

"The dirt?"

"I've never met her."

"Oh. Um…" Over the centuries, I'd had many conversations with demigods who wanted to know more about their absentee godly parents. Those talks rarely went well. I tried to conjure a picture of Terpsichore, but my memories of Olympus were getting fuzzier by the day. I vaguely recalled the Muse frolicking around one of the parks on Mount Olympus, casting

rose petals in her wake as she twirled and pirouetted. Truth be told, Terpsichore had never been my favorite of the Nine Muses. She tended to take the spotlight off me, where it rightly belonged.

"She had your color hair," I ventured.

"Pink?"

"No, I mean…dark. Lots of nervous energy, I suppose, like you. She was never happy unless she was moving, but…"

My voice died. What could I say that wouldn't sound mean? Terpsichore was graceful and poised and didn't look like a wobbly giraffe? Was Lavinia sure there hadn't been some mistake about her parentage? Because I couldn't believe they were related.

"But what?" she pressed.

"Nothing. Hard to remember."

Down at the rostrum, Reyna was calling the meeting to order. "Everyone, if you'll please take your seats! We need to get started. Dakota, can you scoot in a little to make room for—Thanks."

Lavinia regarded me skeptically. "That's the lamest dirt ever. If you can't tell me about my mom, at least tell me what's going on with you and Ms. Praetor down there."

I squirmed. The bench suddenly felt a great deal harder under my clunis. "There's nothing to tell."

"Oh, please. The way you've been sneaking glances at Reyna since you got here? I noticed it. Meg noticed."

"I noticed," Meg confirmed.

"Even Frank Zhang noticed." Lavinia turned up her palms as if she'd just provided the ultimate proof of complete obviousness.

Reyna began to address the crowd: "Senators, guests, we have called this emergency meeting to discuss—"

"Honestly," I whispered to Lavinia, "it's awkward. You wouldn't understand."

She snorted. "Awkward is telling your rabbi that Daniella Bernstein is going to be your date for your bat mitzvah party. Or telling your dad that the only dancing you want to do is tap, so you're not going to carry on the Asimov family tradition. I know all about awkward."

Reyna continued, "In light of Jason Grace's ultimate sacrifice, and our own recent battle against the undead, we have to take very seriously the threat—"

“Wait,” I whispered to Lavinia, her words sinking in. “Your dad is Sergei Asimov? The dancer? The—” I stopped myself before I could say *The smoking-hot Russian ballet star,* but judging from Lavinia’s eye roll, she knew what I was thinking.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Stop trying to change the subject. Are you going to dish on—?”

“Lavinia Asimov!” Reyna called from the rostrum. “Did you have something to say?”

All eyes turned toward us. A few legionnaires smirked, as if this was not the first time Lavinia had been called out during a senate meeting.

Lavinia glanced from side to side, then pointed to herself as if unsure which of the many Lavinia Asimovs Reyna might be addressing. “No, ma’am. I’m good.”

Reyna did not look amused by being called *ma’am.* “I notice you’re chewing gum as well. Did you bring enough for the whole senate?”

“Er, I mean…” Lavinia pulled multiple packs of gum from her pockets. She scanned the crowd, doing a quick guesstimate. “Maybe?”

Reyna glanced heavenward, as if asking the gods, *Why do I have to be the only adult in the room?*

“I’ll assume,” the praetor said, “that you were just trying to draw attention to the guest seated next to you, who has important information to share. Lester Papadopoulos, rise and address the senate!”

12

I now have a plan
To make a plan concerning
The plan for my plan

NORMALLY, WHEN I'M ABOUT to perform, I wait backstage. Once I'm announced and the crowd is frenzied with anticipation, I burst through the curtains, the spotlights hit me, and TA-DA! I am A GOD!

Reyna's introduction did not inspire wild applause. *Lester Papadopoulos, rise and address the senate* was about as exciting as *We will now have a PowerPoint about adverbs.*

As soon as I started making my way to the aisle, Lavinia tripped me. I glared back at her. She gave me an innocent face, like her foot just happened to be there. Given the size of her legs, maybe it had been.

Everyone watched as I fumbled my way through the crowd, trying not to trip on my toga.

"Excuse me. Sorry. Excuse me."

By the time I made it to the rostrum, the audience was whipped into a frenzy of boredom and impatience. No doubt they would've all been checking their phones—except demigods couldn't use smartphones without risking monster attack, so they had no alternative but to stare at me. I had wowed them two days ago with a fantastic musical tribute to Jason Grace, but what had I done for them lately? Only the Lares looked content to wait. They could endure sitting on hard benches forever.

From the back row, Meg waved at me. Her expression was less like, *Hi, you'll do great,* and more like, *Get on with it.* I turned my gaze to Tyson,

who was grinning at me from the front row. When you find yourself focusing on the Cyclops in the crowd for moral support, you know you're going to bomb.

"So…hi."

Great start. I hoped another burst of inspiration might lead to a follow-up song. Nothing happened. I'd left my ukulele in my room, sure that if I'd tried to bring it into the city, Terminus would have confiscated it as a weapon.

"I have some bad news," I said. "And some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

The crowd exchanged apprehensive looks.

Lavinia yelled, "Start with the bad news. That's always best."

"Hey," Frank chastised her. "Like, decorum, you know?"

Having restored solemnity to the senate meeting, Frank gestured for me to proceed.

"The emperors Commodus and Caligula have combined forces," I said. I described what I'd seen in my dream. "They're sailing toward us right now with a fleet of fifty yachts, all equipped with some kind of terrible new weapon. They'll be here by the blood moon. Which as I understand it, is in three days, April eighth, which also happens to be Lester Papadopoulos's birthday."

"Happy birthday!" Tyson said.

"Thanks. Also, I'm not sure what a blood moon is."

A hand shot up in the second row.

"Go ahead, Ida," Reyna said, then added for my benefit, "Centurion of the Second Cohort, legacy of Luna."

"Seriously?" I didn't mean to sound incredulous, but Luna, a Titan, had been in charge of the moon before my sister Artemis took over the job. As far as I knew, Luna had faded away millennia ago. Then again, I'd thought there was nothing left of Helios the sun Titan until I found out that Medea was collecting shreds of his consciousness to heat the Burning Maze. Those Titans were like my acne. They just kept popping up.

The centurion stood, scowling. "Yes, seriously. A blood moon is a full moon that looks red because there's a full lunar eclipse. It's a bad time to fight the undead. They're especially powerful on those nights."

"Actually…" Ella stood, picking at her finger talons. "Actually, the color is caused by the dispersal of reflected light from the sunrise and sunset of earth. A true blood moon refers to four lunar eclipses in a row. The next one

is on April eighth, yep. *Farmer's Almanac.* Moon Phase Calendar supplemental."

She plopped down again, leaving the audience in stunned silence. Nothing is quite so disconcerting as having science explained to you by a supernatural creature.

"Thank you, Ida and Ella," Reyna said. "Lester, did you have more to add?"

Her tone suggested that it would be totally okay if I didn't, since I'd already shared enough information to cause a camp-wide panic.

"I'm afraid so," I said. "The emperors have allied themselves with Tarquin the Proud."

The Lares in the room guttered and flickered.

"Impossible!" cried one.

"Horrible!" cried another.

"We'll all die!" screamed a third, apparently forgetting that he was already dead.

"Guys, chill," Frank said. "Let Apollo talk."

His leadership style was less formal than Reyna's, but he seemed to command just as much respect. The audience settled, waiting for me to continue.

"Tarquin is now some sort of undead creature," I said. "His tomb is nearby. He was responsible for the attack you repulsed on the new moon—"

"Which is also a really cruddy time to fight the undead," Ida volunteered.

"And he'll attack again on the blood moon, in concert with the emperors' assault."

I did my best to explain what I'd seen in my dreams, and what Frank and I had discussed with Ella. I did not mention the reference to Frank's unholy piece of firewood—partly because I didn't understand it, partly because Frank was giving me the pleading teddy-bear eyes.

"Since Tarquin was the one who originally purchased the Sibylline Books," I summed up, "it makes a twisted kind of sense that he would reappear now, when Camp Jupiter is trying to reconstruct those prophecies. Tarquin would be…*invoked* by what Ella is doing."

"Enraged," Ella suggested. "Infuriated. Homicidal."

Looking at the harpy, I thought of the Cumaean Sibyl, and the terrible curse I'd laid upon her. I wondered how Ella might suffer, just because we'd

coerced her into entering the prophecy business. Lupa had warned me: *You will face more sacrifices. Death. Blood.*

I forced that idea aside. “Anyway, Tarquin was monstrous enough when he was alive. The Romans despised him so much they did away with the monarchy forever. Even centuries later, the emperors never dared to call themselves kings. Tarquin died in exile. His tomb was never located.”

“And now it’s here,” Reyna said.

It wasn’t a question. She accepted that an ancient Roman tomb could pop up in Northern California, where it had no business being. The gods moved. The demigod camps moved. It was just our luck that an evil undead lair would move in next door. We really needed stricter mythological zoning laws.

In the first row, next to Hazel, a senator rose to speak. He had dark curly hair, off-center blue eyes, and a cherry-red mustache stain on his upper lip. “So, to sum up: in three days, we’re facing an invasion from two evil emperors, their armies, and fifty ships with weapons we don’t understand, along with another wave of undead like the one that nearly destroyed us last time, when we were a lot stronger. If that’s the bad news, what’s the bad news?”

“I assume we’re getting to that, Dakota.” Reyna turned to me. “Right, Lester?”

“The other bad news,” I said, “is that I have a plan, but it’s going to be hard, maybe impossible, and parts of the plan aren’t exactly…plan-worthy, yet.”

Dakota rubbed his hands. “Well, I’m excited. Let’s hear it!”

He sat back down, pulled a flask from his toga, and took a swig. I guessed that he was a child of Bacchus, and, judging from the smell that wafted across the senate floor, his chosen beverage was fruit punch Kool-Aid.

I took a deep breath. “So. The Sibylline Books are basically like emergency recipes, right? Sacrifices. Ritual prayers. Some are designed to appease angry gods. Some are designed to call for divine aid against your enemies. I believe…I’m pretty sure…if we’re able to find the correct recipe for our predicament, and do what it says, I may be able to summon help from Mount Olympus.”

No one laughed or called me crazy. Gods didn’t intervene in demigod affairs often, but it did happen on rare occasions. The idea wasn’t completely

unbelievable. On the other hand, no one looked terribly assured that I could pull it off.

A different senator raised his hand. “Uh, Senator Larry here, Third Cohort, son of Mercury. So, when you say *help*, do you mean like… battalions of gods charging down here in their chariots, or more like the gods just giving us their blessing, like, *Hey, good luck with that, legion!*?”

My old defensiveness kicked in. I wanted to argue that we gods would never leave our desperate followers hanging like that. But, of course, we did. All the time.

“That’s a good question, Senator Larry,” I admitted. “It would probably be somewhere between those extremes. But I’m confident it would be real help, capable of turning the tide. It may be the only way to save New Rome. And I have to believe Zeus—I mean Jupiter—set my supposed birthday as April eighth for a reason. It’s meant to be a turning point, the day I finally…”

My voice cracked. I didn’t share the other side of that thought: that April 8 might either be the day I began to prove myself worthy of rejoining the gods, or my last birthday ever, the day I went up in flames once and for all.

More murmuring from the crowd. Lots of grave expressions. But I detected no panic. Even the Lares didn’t scream, *We’re all going to die!* The assembled demigods were Romans, after all. They were used to facing dire predicaments, long odds, and strong enemies.

“Okay.” Hazel Levesque spoke for the first time. “So how do we find this correct recipe? Where do we start?”

I appreciated her confident tone. She might have been asking if she could help with something completely doable—like carrying groceries, or impaling ghouls with quartz spikes.

“The first step,” I said, “is to find and explore Tarquin’s tomb—”

“And kill him!” yelled one of the Lares.

“No, Marcus Apulius!” scolded one of his peers. “Tarquin is as dead as we are!”

“Well, what, then?” grumbled Marcus Apulius. “Ask him nicely to leave us alone? This is Tarquin the Proud we’re talking about! He’s a maniac!”

“The first step,” I said, “is only to *explore* the tomb and, ah, find out the right things, as Ella said.”

“Yep,” the harpy agreed. “Ella said that.”

“I have to assume,” I continued, “that if we succeed in this, and come out alive, we will know more about how to proceed. Right now, all I can say with certainty is that the next step will involve finding a soundless god, whatever that means.”

Frank sat forward in his praetor’s chair. “But don’t you know all the gods, Apollo? I mean, you *are* one. Or *were* one. Is there a god of silence?”

I sighed. “Frank, I can barely keep my own *family* of gods straight. There are hundreds of minor gods. I don’t remember any silent gods. Of course, if there *is* one, I doubt we would’ve hung out, me being the god of music.”

Frank looked crestfallen, which made me feel bad. I hadn’t meant to take out my frustrations on one of the few people who still called me Apollo unironically.

“Let’s tackle one thing at a time,” Reyna suggested. “First, the tomb of Tarquin. We have a lead on its location, right, Ella?”

“Yep, yep.” The harpy closed her eyes and recited, *“A wildcat near the spinning lights. The tomb of Tarquin with horses bright. To open his door, two-fifty-four.”*

“That is a prophecy!” Tyson said. “I have it on my back!” The Cyclops stood and ripped off his shirt so fast he must have been waiting for any excuse. “See?”

The spectators all leaned forward, though it would’ve been impossible to read the tattoos from any distance.

“I also have a fish pony by my kidney,” he announced proudly. “Isn’t it cute?”

Hazel averted her eyes as if she might pass out from embarrassment. “Tyson, could you…? I’m sure it’s a lovely fish pony, but…shirt back on, please? I don’t suppose anyone knows what those lines *mean*?”

The Romans observed a moment of silence for the death of clarity that all prophecies symbolized.

Lavinia snorted. “Seriously? Nobody gets it?”

“Lavinia,” Reyna said, her voice strained, “are you suggesting you—”

“Know where the tomb is?” Lavinia spread her hands. “Well, I mean, *A wildcat near the spinning lights. The tomb of Tarquin with horses bright.* There’s a Wildcat Drive in Tilden Park, right over the hills.” She pointed north. “And *horses bright*, *spinning lights*? That would be the Tilden Park carousel, wouldn’t it?”

“Ohhhh.” Several Lares nodded in recognition, as if they spent all their free time riding the local merry-go-rounds.

Frank shifted in his chair. “You think the tomb of an evil Roman king is under a carousel?”

“Hey, I didn’t write the prophecy,” Lavinia said. “Besides, it makes as much sense as anything else we’ve faced.”

Nobody disputed that. Demigods eat weirdness for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“All right, then,” Reyna said. “We have a goal. We need a quest. A *short* quest, since time is very limited. We must designate a team of heroes and have them approved by the senate.”

“Us.” Meg stood. “Gotta be Lester and me.”

I gulped. “She’s right,” I said, which counted as my heroic act for the day. “This is part of my greater quest to regain my place among the gods. I’ve brought this trouble to your doorstep. I need to make it right. Please, don’t anyone try to talk me out of it.”

I waited desperately, in vain, for someone to try to talk me out of it.

Hazel Levesque rose. “I’ll go, too. A centurion is required to lead a quest. If this place is underground, well, that’s kind of my specialty.”

Her tone also said *I have a score to settle.*

Which was fine, except I remembered how Hazel had collapsed that tunnel we’d taken into camp. I had a sudden terrifying vision of being crushed under a merry-go-round.

“That’s three questers, then,” Reyna said. “The correct number for a quest. Now—”

“Two and a half,” Meg interrupted.

Reyna frowned. “Sorry?”

“Lester’s my servant. We’re kind of a team. He shouldn’t count as a full quester.”

“Oh, come on!” I protested.

“So we can take one more,” Meg offered.

Frank sat up. “I’d be happy to—”

“If you didn’t have praetor duties to attend to,” Reyna finished, giving him a look like, *You are not leaving me alone, dude.* “While the questers are out, the rest of us have to prepare the valley’s defenses. There’s a lot to do.”

“Right.” Frank slumped. “So, is there anyone else—?”

POP!

The sound was so loud, half the Lares disintegrated in alarm. Several senators ducked under their seats.

In the back row, Lavinia had a flattened pink gum bubble smeared across her face. She quickly peeled it away and stuck it back in her mouth.

“Lavinia,” Reyna said. “Perfect. Thanks for volunteering.”

“I—But—”

“I call for a senate vote!” Reyna said. “Do we send Hazel, Lester, Meg, and Lavinia on a quest to find the tomb of Tarquin?”

The measure passed unanimously.

We were given full senate approval to find a tomb under a carousel and confront the worst king in Roman history, who also happened to be an undead zombie lord.

My day just kept getting better.

13

Romance disaster
I'm poison for guys and gals
You wanna hang out?

"LIKE CHEWING GUM IS a crime." Lavinia tossed a piece of her sandwich off the roof, where it was immediately snatched up by a seagull.

For our picnic lunch, she had brought me, Hazel, and Meg to her favorite thinking place: the rooftop of New Rome University's bell tower, which Lavinia had discovered access to on her own. People were not exactly encouraged to be up here, but it was not strictly forbidden, either, which seemed to be the space Lavinia most liked inhabiting.

She explained that she enjoyed sitting here because it was directly above the Garden of Faunus, Reyna's favorite thinking spot. Reyna was not in the garden at present, but whenever she was, Lavinia could look down at the praetor, a hundred feet below, and gloat *Ha-ha, my thinking spot is higher than your thinking spot.*

Now, as I sat on the precariously slanted red clay tiles, a half-eaten focaccia in my lap, I could see the entire city and valley spread out below us —everything we stood to lose in the coming invasion. Beyond stretched the flatlands of Oakland, and the San Francisco Bay, which in just a few days would be dotted with Caligula's luxury battle yachts.

"Honestly." Lavinia threw another piece of her grilled cheese to the seagulls. "If the legionnaires went for a stupid *hike* once in a while, they'd know about Wildcat Drive."

I nodded, though I suspected that most legionnaires, who spent a good deal of their time marching in heavy armor, probably wouldn't consider hiking much fun. Lavinia, however, seemed to know every back road, trail, and secret tunnel within twenty miles of Camp Jupiter—I suppose because you never knew when you'd need to sneak out for a date with some pretty Hemlock or Deadly Nightshade.

On my other side, Hazel ignored her veggie wrap and grumbled to herself, "Can't believe Frank…Trying to volunteer…Bad enough after his crazy stunts in the battle…"

Nearby, having already plowed through her lunch, Meg aided her digestion by doing cartwheels. Every time she landed, catching her balance on the loose tiles, my heart free-climbed a little farther up my throat.

"Meg, could you *please* not do that?" I asked.

"It's fun." She fixed her eyes on the horizon and announced, "I want a unicorn." Then she cartwheeled again.

Lavinia muttered to no one in particular, "You popped a bubble—you'll be perfect for this quest!"

"Why do I have to like a guy with a death wish?" Hazel mused.

"Meg," I pleaded, "you're going to fall."

"Even a small unicorn," Meg said. "Not fair they have so many here and I don't have *any*."

We continued this four-part disharmony until a giant eagle swooped out of the sky, snatched the rest of the grilled cheese from Lavinia's hand, and soared away, leaving behind a flock of irritated seagulls.

"Typical." Lavinia wiped her fingers on her pants. "Can't even have a sandwich."

I shoved the rest of the focaccia in my mouth, just in case the eagle came back for seconds.

"Well," Hazel sighed, "at least we got the afternoon off to make plans." She gave half of her veggie wrap to Lavinia.

Lavinia blinked, apparently unsure how to respond to the kind gesture. "I—uh, thanks. But I mean, what is there to plan? We go to the carousel, find the tomb, try not to die."

I swallowed the last of my food, hoping it might push my heart back down to its proper location. "Perhaps we could concentrate on the *not-dying* part. For instance, why wait until tonight? Wouldn't it be safer to go when it's daylight?"

“It’s always dark underground,” Hazel said. “Besides, during the daytime, lots of kids will be at the carousel. I don’t want any of them getting hurt. At night, the place will be deserted.”

Meg plopped down next to us. Her hair now looked like a distressed elderberry shrub. “So, Hazel, can you do other cool underground stuff? Some people were saying you can summon diamonds and rubies.”

Hazel frowned. “Some people?”

“Like Lavinia,” Meg said.

“Oh, my gods!” Lavinia said. “Thanks a lot, Meg!”

Hazel peered into the sky, as if wishing a giant eagle would come and snatch her away. “I can summon precious metals, yes. Riches of the earth. That’s a Pluto thing. But you can’t spend the stuff I summon, Meg.”

I leaned back against the roof tiles. “Because it’s cursed? I seem to recall something about a curse—and not because Lavinia told me anything,” I added hastily.

Hazel picked at her veggie wrap. “It’s not so much a *curse* anymore. In the old days, I couldn’t control it. Diamonds, gold coins, stuff like that would just pop up from the ground whenever I got nervous.”

“Cool,” Meg said.

“No, it really wasn’t,” Hazel assured her. “If somebody picked up the treasures and tried to spend them…horrible things would happen.”

“Oh,” Meg said. “What about now?”

“Since I met Frank…” Hazel hesitated. “A long time ago, Pluto told me that a descendant of Poseidon would wash away my curse. It’s complicated, but Frank *is* a descendant of Poseidon on his mom’s side. Once we started dating…He’s just a *good person*, you know? I’m not saying I needed a fella to solve my problems—”

“A *fella*?” Meg asked.

Hazel’s right eye twitched. “Sorry. I grew up in the 1930s. Sometimes my vocab slips. I’m not saying I needed a *guy* to solve my problems. It’s just that Frank had his own curse to deal with, so he understood me. We helped each other through some dark times—talking together, learning to be happy again. He makes me feel—”

“Loved?” I suggested.

Lavinia met my eyes and mouthed, *Adorable*.

Hazel tucked her feet underneath her. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. But yes. Now I can control my powers a lot better. Jewels don’t pop

up randomly when I get upset. Still, they're not meant to be spent. I think…I have this gut feeling that Pluto wouldn't like that. I don't want to find out what would happen if somebody tried."

Meg pouted. "So you can't give me even a small diamond? Like, just to keep for fun?"

"Meg," I chided.

"Or a ruby?"

"Meg."

"Whatever." Meg frowned at her unicorn shirt, no doubt thinking how cool it would look decorated with several million dollars' worth of precious stones. "I just wanna fight stuff."

"You'll probably get your wish," Hazel said. "But remember, tonight, the idea is to explore and gather intel. We'll need to be stealthy."

"Yes, Meg," I said. "Because, if you'll recall, *Apollo faces death in Tarquin's tomb*. If I must face death, I would rather do so while hiding in the shadows, and then sneak away from it without it ever knowing I was there."

Meg looked exasperated, as if I'd suggested an unfair rule in freeze tag. "Okay. I guess I can stealth."

"Good," Hazel said. "And, Lavinia, no chewing gum."

"Give me some credit. I have very sneaky moves." She wriggled her feet. "Daughter of Terpsichore and all that."

"Hmm," Hazel said. "Okay, then. Everybody gather your supplies and get some rest. We'll meet on the Field of Mars at sundown."

Resting should have been an easy assignment.

Meg went off to explore the camp (read: see the unicorns again), which left me by myself in the café's upstairs room. I lay in my cot, enjoying the quiet, staring at Meg's newly planted irises, which were now in full bloom in the window box. Still, I couldn't sleep.

My stomach wound throbbed. My head buzzed.

I thought of Hazel Levesque and how she'd credited Frank with washing away her curse. Everyone deserved someone who could wash away their curses by making them feel loved. But that was not my fate. Even my greatest romances had *caused* more curses than they lifted.

Daphne. Hyacinthus.

And later, yes, the Cumaean Sibyl.

I remembered the day we had sat together on a beach, the Mediterranean stretching out before us like a sheet of blue glass. Behind us, on the hillside where the Sibyl had her cave, olive trees baked and cicadas droned in the summer heat of Southern Italy. In the distance, Mount Vesuvius rose, hazy and purple.

Conjuring an image of the Sibyl herself was more difficult—not the hunched and grizzled old woman from Tarquin's throne room, but the beautiful young woman she'd been on that beach, centuries before, when Cumae was still a Greek colony.

I had loved everything about her—the way her hair caught the sunlight, the mischievous gleam in her eyes, the easy way she smiled. She didn't seem to care that I was a god, despite having given up everything to be my Oracle: her family, her future, even her name. Once pledged to me, she was known simply as the Sibyl, the voice of Apollo.

But that wasn't enough for me. I was smitten. I convinced myself it was love—the one true romance that would wash away all my past missteps. I wanted the Sibyl to be my partner throughout eternity. As the afternoon went on, I coaxed and pleaded.

"You could be so much more than my priestess," I urged her. "Marry me!"

She laughed. "You can't be serious."

"I am! Ask for anything in return, and it's yours."

She twisted a strand of her auburn locks. "All I've ever wanted is to be the Sibyl, to guide the people of this land to a better future. You've already given me that. So, ha-ha. The joke's on you."

"But—but you've only got one lifetime!" I said. "If you were immortal, you could guide humans to a better future forever, at my side!"

She looked at me askance. "Apollo, please. You'd be tired of me by the end of the week."

"Never!"

"So, you're saying"—she scooped up two heaping handfuls of sand—"if I wished for as many years of life as there are grains of this sand, you would grant me that."

"It is done!" I pronounced. Instantly, I felt a portion of my own power flowing into her life force. "And now, my love—"

"Whoa, whoa!" She scattered the sand, clambering to her feet and backing away as if I were suddenly radioactive. "That was a hypothetical,

lover boy! I didn't agree—"

"What's done is done!" I rose. "A wish cannot be taken back. Now you must honor your side of the bargain."

Her eyes danced with panic. "I—I can't. I won't!"

I laughed, thinking she was merely nervous. I spread my arms. "Don't be afraid."

"Of *course* I'm afraid!" She backed away farther. "Nothing good ever happens to your lovers! I just wanted to be your Sibyl, and now you've made things weird!"

My smile crumbled. I felt my ardor cooling, turning stormy. "Don't anger me, Sibyl. I am offering you the universe. I've given you near-immortal life. You cannot refuse payment."

"Payment?" She balled her hands into fists. "You dare think of me as a *transaction*?"

I frowned. This afternoon really wasn't going the way I'd planned. "I didn't mean—Obviously, I wasn't—"

"Well, *Lord* Apollo," she growled, "if this is a transaction, then I defer payment until your side of the bargain is complete. You said it yourself: *near*-immortal life. I'll live until the grains of sand run out, yes? Come back to me at the end of that time. Then, if you still want me, I'm yours."

I dropped my arms. Suddenly, all the things I'd loved about the Sibyl became things I hated: her headstrong attitude, her lack of awe, her infuriating, unattainable beauty. Especially her beauty.

"Very well." My voice turned colder than any sun god's should be. "You want to argue over the fine print of our *contract*? I promised you life, not youth. You can have your centuries of existence. You will remain my Sibyl. I cannot take those things away, once given. But you will grow old. You will wither. You will not be *able* to die."

"I would prefer that!" Her words were defiant, but her voice trembled with fear.

"Fine!" I snapped.

"Fine!" she yelled back.

I vanished in a column of flame, having succeeded in making things very weird indeed.

Over the centuries, the Sibyl had withered, just as I'd threatened. Her physical form lasted longer than any ordinary mortal's, but the pain I had caused her, the lingering agony…Even if I'd had regrets about my hasty

curse, I couldn't have taken it back any more than she could take back her wish. Finally, around the end of the Roman Empire, I'd heard rumors that the Sibyl's body had crumbled away entirely, yet still she could not die. Her attendants kept her life force, the faintest whisper of her voice, in a glass jar.

I assumed that the jar had been lost sometime after that. That the Sibyl's grains of sand had finally run out. But what if I was wrong? If she were still alive, I doubted she was using her faint whisper of a voice to be a pro-Apollo social media influencer.

I deserved her hatred. I saw that now.

Oh, Jason Grace…I promised you I would remember what it was to be human. But why did human shame have to hurt so much? Why wasn't there an off button?

And thinking of the Sibyl, I couldn't help considering that *other* young woman with a curse: Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano.

I'd been completely blindsided the day I strolled into the Olympian throne room, fashionably late for our meeting as usual, and found Venus studying the luminous image of a young lady floating above her palm. The goddess's expression had been weary and troubled…something I didn't often see.

"Who's that?" I asked, foolishly. "She's beautiful."

That's all the trigger Venus needed to unleash her fury. She told me Reyna's fate: no demigod would ever be able to heal her heart. But that did NOT mean I was the answer to Reyna's problem. Quite the contrary. In front of the entire assembly of gods, Venus announced that I was unworthy. I was a disaster. I had ruined every relationship I was in, and I should keep my godly face away from Reyna, or Venus would curse me with even worse romantic luck than I already had.

The mocking laughter of the other gods still rang in my ears.

If not for that encounter, I might never have known Reyna existed. I certainly had no designs on her. But we always want what we cannot have. Once Venus declared Reyna off-limits, I became fascinated with her.

Why had Venus been so emphatic? What did Reyna's fate mean?

Now I thought I understood. As Lester Papadopoulos, I no longer had a *godly face*. I was neither mortal, nor god, nor demigod. Had Venus somehow known this would happen someday? Had she shown me Reyna and warned me off knowing full well that it would make me obsessed?

Venus was a wily goddess. She played games within games. If it was my fate to be Reyna's true love, to wash away her curse as Frank had done for Hazel, would Venus allow it?

But at the same time, I *was* a romantic disaster. I had ruined every one of my relationships, brought nothing but destruction and misery to the young men and women I'd loved. How could I believe I would be any good for the praetor?

I lay in my cot, these thoughts tossing around in my mind, until late afternoon. Finally, I gave up on the idea of rest. I gathered my supplies—my quiver and bow, my ukulele and my backpack—and I headed out. I needed guidance, and I could think of only one way to get it.

14

Reluctant arrow
Grant me this boon: permission
To skedaddleth

I HAD THE FIELD of Mars all to myself.

Since no war games were scheduled that evening, I could frolic through the wasteland to my heart's content, admiring the wreckage of chariots, broken battlements, smoldering pits, and trenches filled with sharpened spikes. Another romantic sunset stroll wasted because I had no one to share it with.

I climbed an old siege tower and sat facing the northern hills. With a deep breath, I reached into my quiver and pulled out the Arrow of Dodona. I'd gone several days without talking to my annoying far-sighted projectile weapon, which I considered a victory, but now, gods help me, I could think of no one else to turn to.

"I need help," I told it.

The arrow remained silent, perhaps stunned by my admission. Or perhaps I'd pulled out the wrong arrow and I was talking to an inanimate object.

Finally, the shaft rattled in my hand. Its voice resonated in my mind like a thespian tuning fork: *THY WORDS ARE TRUE. BUT IN WHAT SENSE MEANEST THOU?*

Its tone sounded less derisive than usual. That scared me.

"I…I am supposed to show strength," I said. "According to Lupa, I'm supposed to save the day somehow, or the pack—New Rome—will die. But

how do I *do* that?”

I told the arrow all that had happened in the last few days: my encounter with the eurynomoi, my dreams about the emperors and Tarquin, my conversation with Lupa, our quest from the Roman senate. To my surprise, it felt good to pour out my troubles. Considering the arrow didn’t have ears, it was a good listener. It never looked bored, shocked, or disgusted, because it had no face.

“I crossed the Tiber alive,” I summed up, “just like the prophecy said. Now, how do I ‘start to jive’? Does this mortal body have a reset switch?”

The arrow buzzed: *I SHALL THINK UPON THIS.*

“That’s it? No advice? No snarky comments?”

GIVE ME TIME TO CONSIDER, O IMPATIENT LESTER.

“But I don’t *have* time! We’re leaving for Tarquin’s tomb, like”—I glanced to the west, where the sun was beginning to sink behind the hills—“basically now!”

THE JOURNEY INTO THE TOMB WILL NOT BE THY FINAL CHALLENGE. UNLESS THOU SUCKEST MOST WOEFULLY.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

FIGHT NOT THE KING, said the arrow. *HEAREST THOU WHAT THOU NEEDEST, AND SKEDADDLETH.*

“Did you just use the term *skedaddleth*?”

I TRY TO SPEAK PLAINLY TO THEE, TO GRANT THEE A BOON, AND STILL THOU COMPLAINEST.

“I appreciate a good boon as much as the next person. But if I’m going to contribute to this quest and not just cower in the corner, I need to know how”—my voice cracked—“how to be *me* again.”

The vibration of the arrow felt almost like a cat purring, trying to soothe an ill human. *ART THOU SURE THAT IS THY WISH?*

“What do you mean?” I demanded. “That’s the whole point! Everything I’m doing is so—”

“Are you talking to that arrow?” said a voice below me.

At the base of the siege tower stood Frank Zhang. Next to him was Hannibal the Elephant, impatiently pawing the mud.

I’d been so distracted, I’d let an elephant get the drop on me.

“Hi,” I squeaked, my voice still ragged with emotion. “I was just…This arrow gives prophetic advice. It talks. In my head.”

Bless him, Frank managed to maintain a poker face. “Okay. I can leave if __”

“No, no.” I slipped the arrow back in my quiver. “It needs time to process. What brings you out here?”

“Walking the elephant.” Frank pointed to Hannibal, in case I might be wondering which elephant. “He gets stir-crazy when we don’t have war games. Bobby used to be our elephant handler, but…”

Frank shrugged helplessly. I got his meaning: Bobby had been another casualty of the battle. Killed…or maybe worse.

Hannibal grunted deep in his chest. He wrapped his trunk around a broken battering ram, picked it up, and started pounding it into the ground like a pestle.

I remembered my elephant friend Livia back at the Waystation in Indianapolis. She, too, had been grief-stricken, having lost her mate to Commodus’s brutal games. If we survived this upcoming battle, perhaps I should try to introduce Livia and Hannibal. They’d make a cute couple.

I mentally slapped myself. What was I thinking? I had enough to worry about without playing matchmaker to pachyderms.

I climbed down from my perch, careful to protect my bandaged gut.

Frank studied me, perhaps worried by how stiffly I was moving.

“You ready for your quest?” he asked.

“Is the answer to that question ever *yes*?”

“Good point.”

“And what will you do while we’re gone?”

Frank ran a hand across his buzz cut. “Everything we can. Shore up the valley’s defenses. Keep Ella and Tyson working on the Sibylline Books. Send eagles to scout the coast. Keep the legion drilling so they don’t have time to worry about what’s coming. Mostly, though? It’s about being with the troops, assuring them that everything is going to be okay.”

Lying to them, in other words, I thought, though that was bitter and uncharitable.

Hannibal stuck his battering ram upright in a sinkhole. He patted the old tree trunk as if to say, *There you go, little fella. Now you can start growing again.*

Even the elephant was hopelessly optimistic.

“I don’t know how you do it,” I admitted. “Staying positive after all that’s happened.”

Frank kicked a piece of stone. “What’s the alternative?”

“A nervous breakdown?” I suggested. “Running away? But I’m new to this *being mortal* business.”

“Yeah, well. I can’t say those ideas haven’t crossed my mind, but you can’t really do that when you’re a praetor.” He frowned. “Though I’m worried about Reyna. She’s been carrying the burden a lot longer than I have. *Years* longer. The strain of that…I dunno. I just wish I could help her more.”

I recalled Venus’s warning: *You will not stick your ugly, unworthy godly face anywhere near her.* I wasn’t sure which idea was more terrifying: that I might make Reyna’s life worse, or that I might be responsible for making her life better.

Frank apparently misinterpreted my look of concern. “Hey, you’ll be fine. Hazel will keep you safe. She’s one powerful demigod.”

I nodded, trying to swallow the bitter taste in my mouth. I was tired of others keeping me safe. The whole point of consulting the arrow had been to figure out how I could get back to the business of keeping *others* safe. That used to be so easy with my godlike powers.

Was it, though? another part of my brain asked. *Did you keep the Sibyl safe? Or Hyacinthus or Daphne? Or your own son Asclepius? Should I go on?*

Shut up, me, I thought back.

“Hazel seems more worried about *you*,” I ventured. “She mentioned some crazy stunts in the last battle?”

Frank squirmed as if trying to shake an ice cube out of his shirt. “It wasn’t like that. I just did what I had to.”

“And your piece of tinder?” I pointed to the pouch hanging from his belt. “You’re not worried about what Ella said…? Something about fires and bridges?”

Frank gave me a dry little smile. “What, me worry?”

He reached into the pouch and casually pulled out his life stick: a chunk of charred wood the size of a TV remote control. He flipped it and caught it, which almost gave me a panic attack. He might as well have pulled out his beating heart and started juggling it.

Even Hannibal looked uncomfortable. The elephant shifted from foot to foot, shaking his massive head.

“Shouldn’t that stick be locked in the principia’s vault?” I asked. “Or coated in magical flame retardant at least?”

“The pouch is flameproof,” Frank said. “Compliments of Leo. Hazel carried it for me for a while. We talked about other ways to keep it safe. But honestly, I’ve kind of learned to accept the danger. I prefer having the firewood with me. You know how it is with prophecies. The harder you try to avoid them, the harder you fail.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Still, there was a fine line between accepting one’s fate and tempting it. “I’m guessing Hazel thinks you’re too reckless.”

“That’s an ongoing conversation.” He slipped the firewood back in its pouch. “I promise you, I *don’t* have a death wish. It’s just…I can’t let fear hold me back. Every time I lead the legion into battle, I have to put everything on the line, commit to the battle one hundred percent. We all do. It’s the only way to win.”

“That’s a very *Mars* thing to say,” I noted. “Despite my many disagreements with Mars, I mean that as a compliment.”

Frank nodded. “You know, I was standing right about here when Mars appeared on the battlefield last year, told me I was his son. Seems like so long ago.” He gave me a quick scan. “I can’t believe I used to think—”

“That I was your father? But we look so much alike.”

He laughed. “Just take care of yourself, okay? I don’t think I could handle a world with no Apollo in it.”

His tone was so genuine it made me tear up. I’d started to accept that no one wanted Apollo back—not my fellow gods, not the demigods, perhaps not even my talking arrow. Yet Frank Zhang still believed in me.

Before I could do anything embarrassing—like hug him, or cry, or start believing I was a worthwhile individual—I spotted my three quest partners trudging toward us.

Lavinia wore a purple camp T-shirt and ratty jeans over a silver leotard. Her sneakers sported glittery pink laces that matched her hair and no doubt helped her with her stealthy moves. Her manubalista clunked against her shoulder.

Hazel looked slightly more ninja-esque in her black jeans and black zip-front cardigan, her oversize cavalry sword strapped to her belt. I recalled that she favored the spatha because she sometimes fought on horseback while riding the immortal steed Arion. Alas, I doubted Hazel would summon

Arion for our quest today. A magical horse wouldn't be much use for sneaking around an underground tomb.

As for Meg, she looked like Meg. Her red high-tops and yellow leggings clashed epically with her new unicorn T-shirt, which she seemed determined to wear until it fell to pieces. She had applied adhesive bandages across her cheekbones, like warriors or footballers might do. Perhaps she thought they made her look "commando," despite the fact that the bandages were decorated with pictures of Dora the Explorer.

"What are those for?" I demanded.

"They keep the light out of my eyes."

"It'll be nighttime soon. We're going underground."

"They make me look scary."

"Not even remotely."

"Shut up," she ordered, so of course, I had to.

Hazel touched Frank's elbow. "Can I talk with you for a sec?"

It wasn't really a question. She led him out of earshot, followed by Hannibal, who apparently decided their private conversation required an elephant.

"Oy." Lavinia turned to Meg and me. "We may be here awhile. When those two start mother-henning…I swear, if they could encase each other in Styrofoam peanuts, they would."

She sounded part judgmental, part wistful, as if she wished she had an overprotective girlfriend who would encase *her* in Styrofoam peanuts. I could very much relate.

Hazel and Frank had an anxious exchange. I couldn't hear their words, but I imagined the conversation went something like:

I'm worried about you.

No, I'm worried about you.

But I'm more *worried.*

No, I'm *more worried.*

Meanwhile, Hannibal stomped and grunted like he was enjoying himself.

Finally, Hazel rested her fingers on Frank's arm, as if she were afraid he might dissolve into smoke. Then she marched back to us.

"All right," she announced, her expression dour. "Let's go find this tomb before I change my mind."

15

Nightmare carousel
Totally let your kids ride
I'm sure they'll be fine

"NICE NIGHT FOR A hike," Lavinia said.

The sad thing was, I think she meant it.

By that point, we'd been trekking through the Berkeley Hills for over an hour. Despite the cool weather, I was dripping sweat and gasping for breath. Why did hilltops have to be uphill? Lavinia wasn't satisfied with sticking to the valleys, either. Oh, no. She wanted to conquer every summit for no apparent reason. Like fools, we followed her.

We had crossed the borders of Camp Jupiter without a problem. Terminus hadn't even popped up to check our passports. So far we had not been accosted by ghouls or panhandling fauns.

The scenery was pleasant enough. The trail wound through sweet-smelling sage and bay laurel. To our left, silver luminescent fog blanketed the San Francisco Bay. Before us, the hills formed an archipelago of darkness in the ocean of city lights. Regional parks and nature reserves kept the area mostly wild, Lavinia explained.

"Just be on the lookout for mountain lions," she said. "They're all over these hills."

"We're going to face the undead," I said, "and you're warning us about mountain lions?"

Lavinia shot me a look like, *Dude.*

She was right, of course. With my luck, I would probably come all this way, fighting monsters and evil emperors, only to get killed by an overgrown house cat.

"How much farther?" I asked.

"Not this again," Lavinia said. "You aren't even carrying a coffin this time. We're about halfway there."

"Halfway. And we couldn't have taken a car, or a giant eagle, or an elephant?"

Hazel patted me on the shoulder. "Relax, Apollo. Sneaking up on foot draws less attention. Besides, this is an easy quest. Most of mine have been like *Go to Alaska and fight literally everything along the way*, or *Sail halfway across the world and be seasick for months.* This is just *Go over that hill and check on a merry-go-round."*

"A *zombie-infested* merry-go-round," I corrected. "And we've been over several hills."

Hazel glanced at Meg. "Does he always complain this much?"

"He used to be a lot whinier."

Hazel whistled softly.

"I know," Meg agreed. "Big baby."

"I beg your pardon!" I said.

"Shh," Lavinia said, before blowing and popping a giant pink bubble. "Stealth, remember?"

We continued along the trail for another hour or so. As we passed a silver lake nestled between the hills, I couldn't help thinking it was just the sort of place my sister would love. Oh, how I wished she would appear with her Hunters!

Despite our differences, Artemis understood me. Well, okay, she tolerated me. Most of the time. All right, some of the time. I longed to see her beautiful, annoying face again. That's how lonely and pathetic I had become.

Meg walked a few yards ahead of me, flanking Lavinia so they could share bubble gum and talk unicorns. Hazel hiked at my side, though I got the feeling she was mostly trying to make sure I didn't collapse.

"You don't look so good," she noted.

"What gave it away? The cold sweat? The rapid breathing?"

In the darkness, Hazel's gold eyes reminded me of an owl's: supremely alert, ready to fly or pounce as needed. "How's the gut wound?"

“Better,” I said, though I was having more and more trouble convincing myself.

Hazel redid her ponytail, but it was a losing battle. Her hair was so long, curly, and luxurious it kept escaping its scrunchie. “Just no more cuts, all right? Is there anything else you can tell me about Tarquin? Weaknesses? Blind spots? Pet peeves?”

“Don’t they teach you Roman history as part of legion training?”

“Well, yes. But I may have tuned out during the lectures. I went to Catholic school back in New Orleans in the 1930s. I have a lot of experience in tuning out teachers.”

“Mmm. I can relate. Socrates. Very smart. But his discussion groups… not exactly riveting entertainment.”

“So, Tarquin.”

“Right. He was power-mad. Arrogant. Violent. Would kill anyone who got in his way.”

“Like the emperors.”

“But without any of their refinement. Tarquin was also obsessed with building projects. He started the Temple of Jupiter. Also, Rome’s main sewer.”

“Claim to fame.”

“His subjects finally got so weary of taxes and forced labor that they rebelled.”

“They didn’t like digging a sewer? I can’t imagine why.”

It occurred to me that Hazel wasn’t so much interested in information as she was in distracting me from my worries. I appreciated that, but I had trouble returning her smile. I kept thinking about Tarquin’s voice speaking through the ghoul in the tunnel. He had known Hazel’s name. He had promised her a special place among his undead horde.

“Tarquin is sly,” I said. “Like any true psychopath, he has always been good at manipulating people. As for weaknesses, I don’t know. His relentlessness, maybe. Even after he got kicked out of Rome, he never stopped trying to win back the crown. He kept gathering new allies, attacking the city over and over again, even when it was clear he didn’t have the strength to win.”

“Apparently he still hasn’t given up.” Hazel pushed a eucalyptus branch out of our way. “Well, we’ll stick to the plan: get in quietly, investigate, leave. At least Frank is safe back at camp.”

“Because you value his life more than ours?”

“No. Well…”

“You can leave it at *no*.”

Hazel shrugged. “It’s just that Frank seems to be *looking* for danger these days. I don’t suppose he told you what he did at the Battle of the New Moon?”

“He said the battle turned at the Little Tiber. Zombies don’t like running water.”

“*Frank* turned the tide of battle, almost single-handedly. Demigods were falling all around him. He just kept fighting—shape-shifting into a giant snake, then a dragon, then a hippopotamus.” She shuddered. “He makes a *terrifying* hippo. By the time Reyna and I managed to bring up reinforcements, the enemy was already in retreat. Frank had no fear. I just…” Her voice tightened. “I don’t want to lose him. Especially after what happened to Jason.”

I tried to reconcile Hazel’s story of Frank Zhang, fearless-hippo killing machine, with the easygoing, big cuddly praetor who slept in a yellow silk jammie shirt decorated with eagles and bears. I remembered the casual way he’d flipped his stick of firewood. He’d assured me he didn’t have a death wish. Then again, neither had Jason Grace.

“I don’t intend to lose anyone else,” I told Hazel.

I stopped short of making a promise.

The goddess of the River Styx had excoriated me for my broken oaths. She’d warned that everyone around me would pay for my crimes. Lupa, too, had foreseen more blood and sacrifice. How could I promise Hazel that any of us would be safe?

Lavinia and Meg halted so abruptly I almost ran into them.

“See?” Lavinia pointed through a break in the trees. “We’re almost there.”

In the valley below, an empty parking lot and picnic area occupied a clearing in the redwoods. At the far end of the meadow, silent and still, stood a carousel, all its lights blazing.

“Why is it lit up?” I wondered.

“Maybe somebody’s home,” said Hazel.

“I like merry-go-rounds,” said Meg, and she started down the path.

The carousel was topped by a tan dome like a giant pith helmet. Behind a barricade of teal and yellow metal railings, the ride blazed with hundreds of lights. The painted animals threw long distorted shadows across the grass. The horses looked frozen in panic, their eyes wild, their forelegs kicking. A zebra's head was raised as if in agony. A giant rooster flared its red comb and stretched its talons. There was even a hippocampus like Tyson's friend Rainbow, but this fish pony had a snarling face. What sort of parents would let their children ride such nightmarish creatures? Maybe Zeus, I thought.

We approached cautiously, but nothing challenged us, neither living nor dead. The place seemed empty, just inexplicably lit up.

Meg's glowing swords made the grass shimmer at her feet. Lavinia held her manubalista, primed and ready. With her pink hair and gangly limbs, she stood the best chance of sneaking up on the carousel animals and blending in with them, but I decided not to share that observation, as it would no doubt get me shot. Hazel left her sword in its sheath. Even empty-handed, she radiated a more intimidating demeanor than any of us.

I wondered if I should pull out my bow. Then I looked down and realized I had instinctively readied my combat ukulele. Okay. I could provide a jolly tune if we found ourselves in battle. Did that count as heroism?

"Something's not right," Lavinia murmured.

"You think?" Meg crouched. She put down one of her swords and touched the grass with her fingertips. Her hand sent a ripple across the lawn like a stone thrown in water.

"Something's wrong with the soil here," she announced. "The roots don't want to grow too deep."

Hazel arched her eyebrows. "You can talk to plants."

"It's not really talking," Meg said. "But yeah. Even the trees don't like this place. They're trying to grow away from that carousel as fast as they can."

"Which, since they're trees," I said, "is not very fast."

Hazel studied our surroundings. "Let's see what I can find out."

She knelt at the edge of the carousel's base and pressed her palm against the concrete. There were no visible ripples, no rumbling or shaking, but after a count of three, Hazel snatched her hand away. She staggered backward, almost falling over Lavinia.

"Gods." Hazel's whole body trembled. "There's…there's a *massive* complex of tunnels under here."

My mouth went dry. “Part of the Labyrinth?”

“No. I don’t think so. It feels self-contained. The structure is ancient, but—but it also hasn’t been here very long. I know that doesn’t make sense.”

“It does,” I said, “if the tomb relocated.”

“Or regrew,” Meg offered. “Like a tree clipping. Or a fungal spore.”

“Gross,” said Lavinia.

Hazel hugged her elbows. “The place is full of death. I mean, I’m a child of Pluto. I’ve been to the Underworld. But this is worse somehow.”

“I don’t love that,” Lavinia muttered.

I looked down at my ukulele, wishing I’d brought a bigger instrument to hide behind. A stand-up bass, perhaps. “How do we get in?”

I hoped the answer would be *Gosh darn it, we can’t.*

“There.” Hazel pointed to a section of concrete that looked no different from the rest.

We followed her over. She ran her fingers across the dark surface, leaving glowing silver grooves that outlined a rectangular slab the size of a coffin. Oh, why did I have to make that particular analogy?

Her hand hovered over the middle of the rectangle. “I think I’m supposed to write something here. A combination, maybe?”

“To open his door,” Lavinia recalled, *“two-fifty-four.”*

“Wait!” I fought down a wave of panic. “There are lots of ways to write ‘two-fifty-four.’”

Hazel nodded. “Roman numerals, then?”

“Yes. But two-five-four would be written differently in Roman numerals than two hundred and fifty-four, which is different from two and fifty-four.”

“Which is it, then?” Meg asked.

I tried to think. “Tarquin would have a reason to choose that number. He’d make it about himself.”

Lavinia popped a small, stealthy pink bubble. “Like using your birthday for your password?”

“Exactly,” I said. “But he wouldn’t use his birthday. Not for his tomb. Perhaps his date of death? Except that can’t be right. No one’s sure when he died, since he was in exile and buried in secret, but it had to have been around 495 BCE, not 254.”

“Wrong date system,” Meg said.

We all stared at her.

“What?” she demanded. “I got raised in an evil emperor’s palace. We dated everything from the founding of Rome. AUC. *Ab urbe condita*, right?”

“My gods,” I said. “Good catch, Meg. 254 AUC would be…let’s see… 500 BCE. That’s pretty close to 495.”

Hazel’s fingers still hesitated over the concrete. “Close enough to risk it?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to channel my inner Frank Zhang confidence. “Write it as a date: Two hundred and fifty-four. *C-C-L-I-V*.”

Hazel did. The numbers glowed silver. The entire stone slab dissipated into smoke, revealing steps leading down into darkness.

“Okay, then,” Hazel said. “I have a feeling the next part is going to be harder. Follow me. Step only where I step. And *don’t* make any noise.”

16

Meet the new Tarquin
Same as the old Tarquin, but
With a lot less flesh

SO…NO JOLLY TUNES on the ukulele, then.

Fine.

I silently followed Hazel down the steps into the merry-go-tomb.

As we descended, I wondered why Tarquin had chosen to reside under a carousel. He had watched his wife run over her own father in a chariot. Perhaps he liked the idea of an endless ring of horses and monsters circling above his resting place, keeping guard with their fierce faces, even if they were ridden mostly by mortal toddlers. (Who, I suppose, were fierce in their own way.) Tarquin had a brutal sense of humor. He enjoyed tearing families apart, turning their joy into anguish. He was not above using children as human shields. No doubt he found it amusing to place his tomb under a brightly colored kiddie ride.

My ankles wobbled in terror. I reminded myself there was a reason I was climbing into this murderer's lair. I couldn't remember what that reason was at the moment, but there had to be one.

The steps ended in a long corridor, its limestone walls decorated with rows of plaster death masks. At first, this did not strike me as odd. Most wealthy Romans kept a collection of death masks to honor their ancestors. Then I noticed the masks' expressions. Like the carousel animals above, the plaster faces were frozen in panic, agony, rage, terror. These were not tributes. They were trophies.

I glanced back at Meg and Lavinia. Meg stood at the base of the stairs, blocking any possible retreat. The glittery unicorn on her T-shirt grinned at me hideously.

Lavinia met my eyes as if to say, *Yes, those masks are messed up. Now, keep moving.*

We followed Hazel down the corridor, every clink and rustle of our weapons echoing against the barreled ceiling. I was sure the Berkeley Seismology Lab, several miles away, would pick up my heartbeat on their seismographs and send out earthquake early warnings.

The tunnel split several times, but Hazel always seemed to know which direction to take. Occasionally she'd stop, look back at us, and point urgently to some part of the floor, reminding us not to stray from her path. I didn't know what would happen if I took a wrong step, but I had no desire to have my death mask added to Tarquin's collection.

After what seemed like hours, I began to hear water dripping somewhere in front of us. The tunnel opened into a circular room like a large cistern, the floor nothing but a narrow stone path across a deep dark pool. Hooked on the far wall were half a dozen wicker boxes like lobster traps, each with a circular opening at the bottom just the right size for…Oh, gods. Each box was the right size to be fitted over a person's head.

A tiny whimper escaped my mouth.

Hazel glanced back and mouthed, *What?*

A half-remembered story floated up from the sludge of my brain: how Tarquin had executed one of his enemies by drowning him in a sacred pool —binding the man's hands, placing a wicker cage over his head, then slowly adding rocks to the cage until the man could no longer keep his head above water.

Apparently, Tarquin still enjoyed that particular form of entertainment.

I shook my head. *You don't want to know.*

Hazel, being wise, took my word for it. She led us onward.

Just before the next chamber, Hazel held up a hand in warning. We halted. Following her gaze, I could make out two skeleton guards at the far side of the room, flanking an elaborately carved stone archway. The guards faced each other, wearing full war helmets, which was probably why they hadn't spotted us yet. If we made the slightest sound, if they glanced this way for any reason, we would be seen.

About seventy feet separated us from their position. The floor of their chamber was littered with old human bones. No way could we sneak up on them. These were skeleton warriors, the special forces of the undead world. I had zero desire to fight them. I shivered, wondering who they had been before the eurynomoi stripped them to the bones.

I met Hazel's eyes, then pointed back the way we'd come. *Retreat?*

She shook her head. *Wait.*

Hazel shut her eyes in concentration. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of her face.

The two guards snapped to attention. They turned away from us, facing the archway, then marched through, side by side, into the darkness.

Lavinia's gum almost fell out of her mouth. "How?" she whispered.

Hazel put her finger to her lips, then motioned for us to follow.

The chamber was now empty except for the bones scattered across the floor. Perhaps the skeleton warriors came here to pick up spare parts. Along the opposite wall, above the archway, ran a balcony accessed by a staircase on either side. Its railing was a latticework of contorted human skeletons, which did not freak me out at all. Two doorways led off from the balcony. Except for the main archway through which our skeleton friends had marched, those seemed to be the only exits from the chamber.

Hazel led us up the left-hand staircase. Then, for reasons known only to herself, she crossed the balcony and took the doorway on the right. We followed her through.

At the end of a short corridor, about twenty feet ahead, firelight illuminated another balcony with a skeletal railing, the mirror image of the one we'd just left. I couldn't see much of the chamber beyond it, but the space was clearly occupied. A deep voice echoed from within—a voice I recognized.

Meg flicked her wrists, retracting her swords into rings—not because we were out of danger, but because she understood that even a little extra glow might give away our position. Lavinia tugged an oil cloth from her back pocket and draped it over her manubalista. Hazel gave me a look of warning that was completely unnecessary.

I knew what lay just ahead. Tarquin the Proud was holding court.

I crouched behind the balcony's skeletal latticework and peered into the throne room below, desperately hoping none of the undead would look up

and see us. Or smell us. Oh, human body odor, why did you have to be so pungent after several hours of hiking?

Against the far wall, between two massive stone pillars, sat a sarcophagus chiseled with bas relief images of monsters and wild animals, much like the creatures on the Tilden Park carousel. Lounging across the sarcophagus lid was the thing that had once been Tarquinius Superbus. His robes had not been laundered in several thousand years. They hung off him in moldering shreds. His body had withered to a blackened skeleton. Patches of moss clung to his jawbone and cranium, giving him a grotesque beard and hairdo. Tendrils of glowing purple gas slithered through his rib cage and circled his joints, coiling up his neck and into his skull, lighting his eye sockets fiery violet.

Whatever that purple light was, it seemed to be holding Tarquin together. It probably wasn't his soul. I doubted Tarquin ever had one of those. More likely it was his sheer ambition and hatred, a stubborn refusal to give up no matter how long he'd been dead.

The king seemed to be in the midst of scolding the two skeleton guards Hazel had manipulated.

"Did I call you?" demanded the king. "No, I did not. So why are you here?"

The skeletons looked at each other as if wondering the same thing.

"Get back to your posts!" Tarquin shouted.

The guards marched back the way they had come.

This left three eurynomoi and half a dozen zombies milling around in the room, though I got the feeling there might be more directly beneath our balcony. Even worse, the zombies—vrykolakai, whatever you wanted to call them—were former Roman legionnaires. Most were still dressed for battle in dented armor and torn clothing, their skin puffy, their lips blue, gaping wounds in their chests and limbs.

The pain in my gut became almost intolerable. The words from the Burning Maze prophecy were stuck on replay in my mind: *Apollo faces death. Apollo faces death.*

Next to me, Lavinia trembled, her eyes tearing up. Her gaze was fixed on one of the dead legionnaires: a young man with long brown hair, the left side of his face badly burned. A former friend, I guessed. Hazel gripped Lavinia's shoulder—perhaps to comfort her, perhaps to remind her to be silent. Meg

knelt at my other side, her eyeglasses glinting. I desperately wished I had a permanent marker to black out her rhinestones.

She seemed to be counting enemies, calculating how fast she could take them all down. I had great faith in Meg's sword skills, at least when she wasn't exhausted from bending eucalyptus trees, but I also knew these enemies were too many, too powerful.

I touched her knee for attention. I shook my head and tapped my ear, reminding her that we were here to spy, not to fight.

She stuck out her tongue.

We were simpatico like that.

Below, Tarquin grumbled something about not being able to find good help. "Anyone seen Caelius? Where is he? CAELIUS!"

A moment later, a eurynomos shuffled in from a side tunnel. He knelt before the king and screamed, "EAT FLESH! SOOOON!"

Tarquin hissed. "Caelius, we've discussed this. Keep your wits!"

Caelius slapped himself in the face. "Yes, my king." His voice now had a measured British accent. "Terribly sorry. The fleet is on schedule. It should arrive in three days, just in time for the blood moon's rising."

"Very well. And our own troops?"

"EAT FLESH!" Caelius slapped himself again. "Apologies, sire. Yes, everything is ready. The Romans suspect nothing. As they turn outward to face the emperors, we will strike!"

"Good. It is imperative we take the city first. When the emperors arrive, I want to be already in control! They can burn the rest of the Bay Area if they wish, but the city is mine."

Meg clenched her fists until they turned the color of the bone latticework. After our experiences with the heat-distressed dryads of Southern California, she had gotten a little touchy whenever evil megalomaniacs threatened to torch the environment.

I gave her my most serious *Stay cool* glare, but she wouldn't look at me.

Down below, Tarquin was saying, "And the silent one?"

"He is well-guarded, sire," Caelius promised.

"Hmm," Tarquin mused. "Double the flock, nevertheless. We must be sure."

"But, my king, surely the Romans cannot know about Sutro—"

"Silence!" Tarquin ordered.

Caelius whimpered. “Yes, my king. FLESH! Sorry, my king. EAT FLESH!”

Tarquin raised his glowing purple skull toward our balcony. I prayed that he hadn’t noticed us. Lavinia stopped chewing her gum. Hazel looked deep in concentration, perhaps willing the undead king to look away.

After a count of ten, Tarquin chuckled. “Well, Caelius, it looks like you’ll get to eat flesh sooner than I thought.”

“Master?”

“We have interlopers.” Tarquin raised his voice: “Come down, you four! And meet your new king!”

17

Meg, don't you dare—MEG!
Or you could just get us killed
Yeah, sure, that works, too

I HOPED THERE WERE four other interlopers hidden somewhere on this balcony. Surely, Tarquin was talking to them and not us.

Hazel jabbed her thumb toward the exit, the universal sign for *LET'S VAMOOSE!* Lavinia began crawling that way on her hands and knees. I was about to follow when Meg ruined everything.

She stood up tall (well, as tall as Meg can be), summoned her swords, and leaped over the railing.

"MEEEEEEEEEGAH!" I shouted, half war cry, half *What in Hades are you doing?*

Without any conscious decision, I was on my feet, my bow in hand, an arrow nocked and loosed, then another and another. Hazel muttered a curse no proper lady from the 1930s should've known, drew her cavalry sword, and jumped into the fray so Meg would not have to stand alone. Lavinia rose, struggling to uncover her manubalista, but the oil cloth seemed to be stuck on the crossbeam.

More undead swarmed Meg from under the balcony. Her twin swords whirled and flashed, cutting off limbs and heads, reducing zombies to dust. Hazel decapitated Caelius, then turned to face another two eurynomoi.

The deceased former legionnaire with the burned face would have stabbed Hazel in the back, but Lavinia loosed her crossbow just in time. The

Imperial gold bolt hit the zombie between the shoulder blades, causing him to implode in a pile of armor and clothes.

"Sorry, Bobby!" Lavinia said with a sob.

I made a mental note never to tell Hannibal how his former trainer had met his end.

I kept firing until only the Arrow of Dodona remained in my quiver. In retrospect, I realized I'd fired a dozen arrows in about thirty seconds, each a kill shot. My fingers literally steamed. I hadn't unleashed a volley like that since I was a god.

This should have delighted me, but any feeling of satisfaction was cut short by Tarquin's laughter. As Hazel and Meg cut down the last of his minions, he rose from his sarcophagus couch and gave us a round of applause. Nothing sounds more sinister than the ironic slow-clap of two skeletal hands.

"Lovely!" he said. "Oh, that was very nice! You'll all make valuable members of my team!"

Meg charged.

The king didn't touch her, but with a flick of his hand, some invisible force sent Meg flying backward into the far wall. Her swords clattered to the floor.

A guttural sound escaped my throat. I leaped over the railing, landing on one of my own spent arrow shafts (which are every bit as treacherous as banana peels). I slipped and fell hard on my hip. Not my most heroic entrance. Meanwhile, Hazel ran at Tarquin. She was hurled aside with another blast of unseen force.

Tarquin's hearty chuckle filled the chamber. From the corridors on either side of his sarcophagus, the sounds of shuffling feet and clanking armor echoed, getting closer and closer. Up on the balcony, Lavinia furiously cranked her manubalista. If I could buy her another twenty minutes or so, she might be able to take a second shot.

"Well, Apollo," said Tarquin, purple coils of mist slithering from his eye sockets and into his mouth. Yuck. "Neither of us have aged well, have we?"

My heart pounded. I groped around for usable arrows but found only more broken shafts. I was half-tempted to shoot the Arrow of Dodona, but I couldn't risk giving Tarquin a weapon with prophetic knowledge. Can talking arrows be tortured? I didn't want to find out.

Meg struggled to her feet. She looked unhurt but grumpy, as she tended to whenever she got thrown into walls. I imagined she was thinking the same thing I was: this situation was too familiar, too much like Caligula's yacht when Meg and Jason had been imprisoned by *venti*. I couldn't let another scenario like that play out. I was tired of evil monarchs tossing us around like rag dolls.

Hazel stood, covered head to toe in zombie dust. That couldn't have been good for her respiratory system. In the back of my mind, I wondered if we could get Justicia the Roman law goddess to file a class-action suit on our behalf against Tarquin for hazardous tomb conditions.

"Everyone," Hazel said, "back up."

It was the same thing she'd told us in the tunnel to camp, right before turning the eurynomos into ceiling art.

Tarquin just laughed. "Ah, Hazel Levesque, your clever tricks with rocks won't work here. This is my seat of power! My reinforcements will arrive any moment. It will be easier if you don't resist your deaths. I'm told it's less painful that way."

Above me, Lavinia continued to crank her hand-cannon.

Meg picked up her swords. "Fight or run, guys?"

The way she glared at Tarquin, I was pretty sure I knew her preference.

"Oh, child," Tarquin said. "You can try to run, but soon enough, you'll be fighting at my side with those wonderful blades of yours. As for Apollo… he's not going anywhere."

He curled his fingers. He was nowhere close to me, but my gut wound convulsed, sending hot skewers into my rib cage and groin. I screamed. My eyes welled with tears.

"Stop it!" Lavinia shrieked. She dropped from the balcony and landed at my side. "What are you doing to him?"

Meg charged again at the undead king, perhaps hoping to catch him off guard. Without even looking at her, Tarquin tossed her aside with another blast of force. Hazel stood as stiff as a limestone column, her eyes fixed on the wall behind the king. Tiny cracks had begun to spiderweb across the stone.

"Why, Lavinia," the king said, "I'm calling Apollo home!"

He grinned, which was the only facial expression he was capable of, having no face. "Poor Lester would've been compelled to seek me out

eventually, once the poison took hold of his brain. But getting him here so soon—this is a special treat!"

He clenched his bony fist tighter. My pain tripled. I groaned and blubbered. My vision swam in red Vaseline. How was it possible to feel so much pain and not die?

"Leave him alone!" yelled Meg.

From the tunnels on either side of Tarquin's sarcophagus, more zombies began to spill into the room.

"Run." I gasped. "Get out of here."

I now understood the lines from the Burning Maze: I would face death in Tarquin's tomb, or a fate *worse* than death. But I would not allow my friends to perish, too.

Stubbornly, annoyingly, they refused to leave.

"Apollo is *my* servant now, Meg McCaffrey," Tarquin said. "You really shouldn't mourn him. He's terrible to the people he loves. You can ask the Sibyl."

The king regarded me as I writhed like a bug pinned to a corkboard. "I hope the Sibyl lasts long enough to see you humbled. That may be what finally breaks her. And when those bumbling emperors arrive, they will see the true terror of a Roman king!"

Hazel howled. The back wall collapsed, bringing down half the ceiling. Tarquin and his troops disappeared under an avalanche of rocks the size of assault vehicles.

My pain subsided to mere agony levels. Lavinia and Meg hauled me to my feet. Angry purple lines of infection now twisted up my arms. That probably wasn't good.

Hazel hobbled over. Her corneas had turned an unhealthy shade of gray. "We need to move."

Lavinia glanced at the pile of rubble. "But isn't he—?"

"Not dead," Hazel said with bitter disappointment. "I can feel him squirming under there, trying to…" She shivered. "It doesn't matter. More undead will be coming. Let's go!"

Easier said than done.

Hazel limped along, breathing heavily as she led us back through a different set of tunnels. Meg guarded our retreat, slicing down the occasional zombie who stumbled across our path. Lavinia had to support most of my

weight, but she was deceptively strong, just as she was deceptively nimble. She seemed to have no trouble hauling my sorry carcass through the tomb.

I was only semiconscious of my surroundings. My bow clanged against my ukulele, making a jarring open chord in perfect sync with my rattled brain.

What had just happened?

After that beautiful moment of godlike prowess with my bow, I'd suffered an ugly, perhaps terminal setback with my gut wound. I now had to admit I was *not* getting better. Tarquin had spoken of a poison slowly making its way to my brain. Despite the best efforts of the camp's healers, I was turning, becoming one of the king's creatures. By facing him, I had apparently accelerated the process.

This should have terrified me. The fact that I could think about it with such detachment was itself concerning. The medical part of my mind decided I must be going into shock. Or possibly just, you know, dying.

Hazel stopped at the intersection of two corridors. "I—I'm not sure."

"What do you mean?" Meg asked.

Hazel's corneas were still the color of wet clay. "I can't get a read. There should be an exit here. We're close to the surface, but…I'm sorry, guys."

Meg retracted her blades. "That's okay. Keep watch."

"What are you doing?" Lavinia asked.

Meg touched the nearest wall. The ceiling shifted and cracked. I had a fleeting image of us getting buried like Tarquin under several tons of rock—which, in my present state of mind, seemed like an amusing way to die. Instead, dozens of thickening tree roots wriggled their way through the cracks, pushing apart the stones. Even as a former god accustomed to magic, I found it mesmerizing. The roots spiraled and wove themselves together, shoving aside the earth, letting in the dim glow of moonlight, until we found ourselves at the base of a gently sloping chute (A root chute?) with handholds and footholds for climbing.

Meg sniffed the air above. "Smells safe. Let's go."

While Hazel stood guard, Meg and Lavinia joined forces to get me up the chute. Meg pulled. Lavinia pushed. It was all very undignified, but the thought of Lavinia's half-primed manubalista jostling around somewhere below my delicate posterior gave me an incentive to keep moving.

We emerged at the base of a redwood in the middle of the forest. The carousel was nowhere in sight. Meg gave Hazel a hand up, then touched the

trunk of the tree. The root chute spiraled shut, submerging under the grass.

Hazel swayed on her feet. “Where are we?”

“This way,” Lavinia announced.

She shouldered my weight again, despite my protestations that I was fine. Really, I was only dying a little bit. We staggered down a trail among the looming redwoods. I couldn’t see the stars or discern any landmarks. I had no idea which direction we were heading, but Lavinia seemed undeterred.

“How do you know where we are?” I asked.

“Told you,” she said. “I like to explore.”

She must really like Poison Oak, I thought for the umpteenth time. Then I wondered if Lavinia simply felt more at home in the wild than she did at camp. She and my sister would get along fine.

“Are any of you hurt?” I asked. “Did the ghouls scratch you?”

The girls all shook their heads.

“What about you?” Meg scowled and pointed at my gut. “I thought you were getting better.”

“I guess I was too optimistic.” I wanted to scold her for jumping into combat and nearly getting us all killed, but I didn’t have the energy. Also, the way she was looking at me, I got the feeling that her grumpy facade might collapse into tears faster than Tarquin’s ceilings had crumbled.

Hazel eyed me warily. “You should have healed. I don’t understand.”

“Lavinia, can I have some gum?” I asked.

“Seriously?” She dug in her pocket and handed me a piece.

“You’re a corrupting influence.” With leaden fingers, I managed to unwrap the gum and stick it in my mouth. The flavor was sickly sweet. It *tasted* pink. Still, it was better than the sour ghoul poison welling up in my throat. I chewed, glad for something to focus on beside the memory of Tarquin’s skeletal fingers curling and sending scythes of fire through my intestines. And what he had said about the Sibyl…? No. I couldn’t process that right now.

After a few hundred yards of torturous hiking, we reached a small stream.

“We’re close,” Lavinia said.

Hazel glanced behind us. “I’m sensing maybe a dozen behind us, closing fast.”

I saw and heard nothing, but I took Hazel's word for it. "Go. You'll move faster without me."

"Not happening," Meg said.

"Here, take Apollo." Lavinia offered me to Meg like I was a sack of groceries. "You guys cross this stream, go up that hill. You'll see Camp Jupiter."

Meg straightened her grimy glasses. "What about you?"

"I'll draw them away." Lavinia patted her manubalista.

"That's a terrible idea," I said.

"It's what I do," Lavinia said.

I wasn't sure if she meant *drawing away enemies* or *executing terrible ideas.*

"She's right," Hazel decided. "Be careful, legionnaire. We'll see you at camp."

Lavinia nodded and darted into the woods.

"Are you sure that was wise?" I asked Hazel.

"No," she admitted. "But whatever Lavinia does, she always seems to come back unscathed. Now let's get you home."

18

Cooking with Pranjal
Chickweed and unicorn horn
Slow-basted zombie

***HOME*. SUCH A WONDERFUL** word.

I had no idea what it meant, but it sounded nice.

Somewhere along the trail back to camp, my mind must have detached from my body. I don't remember passing out. I don't remember reaching the valley. But at some point, my consciousness drifted away like an escaped helium balloon.

I dreamed of homes. Had I ever really had one?

Delos was my birthplace, but only because my pregnant mother, Leto, took refuge there to escape Hera's wrath. The island served as an emergency sanctuary for my sister and me, too, but it never felt like *home* any more than the backseat of a taxi would feel like home to a child born on the way to a hospital.

Mount Olympus? I had a palace there. I visited for the holidays. But it always felt more like the place my dad lived with my stepmom.

The Palace of the Sun? That was Helios's old crib. I'd just redecorated.

Even Delphi, home of my greatest Oracle, had originally been the lair of Python. Try as you might, you can *never* get the smell of old snakeskin out of a volcanic cavern.

Sad to say, in my four-thousand-plus years, the times I'd felt most at home had all happened during the past few months: at Camp Half-Blood, sharing a cabin with my demigod children; at the Waystation with Emma, Jo,

Georgina, Leo, and Calypso, all of us sitting around the dinner table chopping vegetables from the garden for dinner; at the Cistern in Palm Springs with Meg, Grover, Mellie, Coach Hedge, and a prickly assortment of cactus dryads; and now at Camp Jupiter, where the anxious, grief-stricken Romans, despite their many problems, despite the fact that I brought misery and disaster wherever I went, had welcomed me with respect, a room above their coffee shop, and some lovely bed linens to wear.

These places were homes. Whether I deserved to be part of them or not—that was a different question.

I wanted to linger in those good memories. I suspected I might be dying—perhaps in a coma on the forest floor as ghoul poison spread through my veins. I wanted my last thoughts to be happy ones. My brain had different ideas.

I found myself in the cavern of Delphi.

Nearby, dragging himself through the darkness, wreathed in orange and yellow smoke, was the all-too-familiar shape of Python, like the world's largest and most rancid Komodo dragon. His smell was oppressively sour—a physical pressure that constricted my lungs and made my sinuses scream. His eyes cut through the sulfuric vapor like headlamps.

"You think it matters." Python's booming voice rattled my teeth. "These little victories. You think they lead to something?"

I couldn't speak. My mouth still tasted like bubble gum. I was grateful for the sickly sweetness—a reminder that a world existed outside of this cave of horrors.

Python lumbered closer. I wanted to grab my bow, but my arms were paralyzed.

"It was for nothing," he said. "The deaths you caused—the deaths you *will* cause—they don't matter. If you win every battle, you will still lose the war. As usual, you don't understand the true stakes. Face me, and you will die."

He opened his vast maw, slavering reptilian lips pulled over glistening teeth.

"GAH!" My eyes flew open. My limbs flailed.

"Oh, good," said a voice. "You're awake."

I was lying on the ground inside some sort of wooden structure, like… ah, a stable. The smells of hay and horse manure filled my nostrils. A burlap blanket prickled against my back. Peering down at me were two unfamiliar

faces. One belonged to a handsome young man with silky black hair cresting over his wide sepia forehead.

The other face belonged to a unicorn. Its muzzle glistened with mucus. Its startled blue eyes, wide and unblinking, fixed on me as if I might be a tasty bag of oats. Stuck on the tip of its horn was a crank-handled rotary cheese grater.

"GAH!" I said again.

"Calm down, dummy," Meg said, somewhere to my left. "You're with friends."

I couldn't see her. My peripheral vision was still blurry and pink.

I pointed weakly at the unicorn. "Cheese grater."

"Yes," said the lovely young man. "It's the easiest way to get a dose of horn shavings directly into the wound. Buster doesn't mind. Do you, Buster?"

Buster the unicorn continued to stare at me. I wondered if he was even alive, or just a prop unicorn they had wheeled in.

"My name's Pranjal," said the young man. "Head healer for the legion. I worked on you when you first got here, but we didn't really meet then, since, well, you were unconscious. I'm a son of Asclepius. I guess that makes you my grandpa."

I moaned. "Please don't call me Grandpa. I feel terrible enough already. Are—are the others all right? Lavinia? Hazel?"

Meg hovered into view. Her glasses were clean, her hair was washed, and her clothes were changed, so I must have been out for quite a while. "We're all fine. Lavinia got back right after we did. But you almost died." She sounded annoyed, as if my death would have inconvenienced her greatly. "You should've told me how bad that cut was."

"I thought…I assumed it would heal."

Pranjal knit his eyebrows. "Yes, well, it *should* have. You got excellent care, if I do say so myself. We know about ghoul infections. They're usually curable, if we catch them within twenty-four hours."

"But *you*," Meg said, scowling at me. "You aren't responding to treatment."

"That's not *my* fault!"

"It could be your godly side," Pranjal mused. "I've never had a patient who was a former immortal. That might make you resistant to demigod healing, or more susceptible to undead scratches. I just don't know."

I sat up on my elbows. I was bare-chested. My wound had been re-bandaged, so I couldn't tell how bad it looked underneath, but the pain had subsided to a dull ache. Tendrils of purple infection still snaked from my belly, up my chest, and down my arms, but their color had faded to a faint lavender.

"Whatever you did obviously helped," I said.

"We'll see." Pranjal's frown was not encouraging. "I tried a special concoction, a kind of magical equivalent to broad-spectrum antibiotics. It required a special strain of *Stellaria media*—magical chickweed—that doesn't grow in Northern California."

"It grows here now," Meg announced.

"Yes," Pranjal agreed with a smile. "I may have to keep Meg around. She's pretty handy for growing medicinal plants."

Meg blushed.

Buster still hadn't moved or blinked. I hoped Pranjal occasionally put a spoon under the unicorn's nostrils to make sure he was still breathing.

"At any rate," Pranjal continued, "the salve I used wasn't a cure. It will only slow down your…your condition."

My condition. What a wonderful euphemism for turning into a walking corpse.

"And if I do want a cure?" I asked. "Which, by the way, I do."

"That's going to take more powerful healing than I'm capable of," he confessed. "*God*-level healing."

I felt like crying. I decided Pranjal needed to work on his bedside manner, perhaps by having a better collection of miraculous over-the-counter cures that did not require divine intervention.

"We could try more horn shavings," Meg suggested. "That's fun. I mean, that might work."

Between Meg's anxiousness to use the cheese grater and Buster's hungry stare, I was starting to feel like a plate of pasta. "I don't suppose you have any leads on available healing gods?"

"Actually," Pranjal said, "if you're feeling up to it, you should get dressed and have Meg walk you to the principia. Reyna and Frank are anxious to talk to you."

Meg took pity on me.

Before meeting the praetors, she took me back to Bombilo's so I could wash up and change clothes. Afterward, we stopped by the legion mess hall for food. Judging from the angle of the sun and the near-empty dining room, I guessed it was late afternoon, between lunch and dinner, which meant I'd been unconscious for almost a full day.

The day after tomorrow, then, would be April 8—the blood moon, Lester's birthday, the day two evil emperors and an undead king attacked Camp Jupiter. On the bright side, the mess hall was serving fish sticks.

When I was done with my meal (here's a culinary secret I discovered: ketchup really enhances fries and fish sticks), Meg escorted me down the Via Praetoria to legion headquarters.

Most of the Romans seemed to be off doing whatever Romans did in the late afternoon: marching, digging trenches, playing *Fortiusnitius*…I wasn't really sure. The few legionnaires we passed stared at me as we walked by, their conversations sputtering to a stop. I guessed word had spread about our adventure in Tarquin's tomb. Perhaps they'd heard that I had a slight turning-into-a-zombie problem and they were waiting for me to scream for brains.

The thought made me shudder. My gut wound felt so much better at the moment. I could walk without cringing. The sun was shining. I'd eaten a good meal. How could I still be poisoned?

Denial is a powerful thing.

Unfortunately, I suspected Pranjal was right. He had only slowed down the infection. My condition was beyond anything that camp healers, Greek or Roman, could solve. I needed godly help—which was something Zeus had expressly forbidden the other gods to give me.

The guards at the *praetorium* let us through immediately. Inside, Reyna and Frank sat behind a long table laden with maps, books, daggers, and a large jar of jelly beans. Against the back wall, in front of a purple curtain, stood the legion's golden eagle, humming with energy. Being so near to it made the hairs on my arms stand up. I didn't know how the praetors could tolerate working here with that thing right behind them. Hadn't they read the medical journal articles about the effects of long-term exposure to electromagnetic Roman standards?

Frank appeared ready for battle in his full armor. Reyna looked like *she* was the one who'd just woken up. She wore her purple cloak hastily pulled over a too-large PUERTO RICO FUERTE T-shirt, which I wondered if she'd slept in—but that was none of my business. The left side of her hair was an

adorable fuzzy black mess of cowlicks that made me wonder if she slept on that side—and, again, that was none of my business.

Curled on the carpet at her feet were two automatons I hadn't seen before—a pair of greyhounds, one gold and one silver. They both raised their heads when they saw me, then sniffed the air and growled as if to say, *Hey, Mom, this guy smells like zombie. Can we kill him?*

Reyna hushed them. She dug some jelly beans out of the jar and tossed them to the dogs. I wasn't sure why metallic greyhounds would like candy, but they snapped up the morsels, then settled their heads back on the carpet.

"Er, nice dogs," I said. "Why haven't I seen them before?"

"Aurum and Argentum have been out searching," Reyna said, in a tone that discouraged follow-up questions. "How is your wound?"

"My wound is thriving," I said. "Me, not so much."

"He's better than before," Meg insisted. "I grated some unicorn-horn shavings on his cut. It was fun."

"Pranjal helped, too," I said.

Frank gestured at the two visitors' seats. "You guys make yourselves comfortable."

Comfortable was a relative term. The three-legged foldable stools did not look as cushy as the praetors' chairs. They also reminded me of the Oracle's tripod seat in Delphi, which reminded me of Rachel Elizabeth Dare back at Camp Half-Blood, who was not-so-patiently waiting for me to restore her powers of prophecy. Thinking about her reminded me of the Delphic cave, which reminded me of Python, which reminded me of my nightmare and how scared I was of dying. I hate stream of consciousness.

Once we were seated, Reyna spread a parchment scroll across the table. "So, we've been working with Ella and Tyson since yesterday, trying to decipher some more lines of prophecy."

"We've made progress," Frank added. "We *think* we've found the recipe you were talking about at the senate meeting—the ritual that could summon divine aid to save the camp."

"That's great, right?" Meg reached for the jar of jelly beans but retracted her hand when Aurum and Argentum began growling.

"Maybe." Reyna exchanged a worried look with Frank. "The thing is, if we're reading the lines correctly…the ritual requires a death sacrifice."

The fish sticks began sword-fighting with the french fries in my stomach.

“That can’t be right,” I said. “We gods would never ask you mortals to sacrifice one of your own. We gave that up centuries ago! Or millennia ago, I can’t remember. But I’m *sure* we gave it up!”

Frank gripped his armrests. “Yeah, that’s the thing. It’s not a mortal who’s supposed to die.”

“No.” Reyna locked eyes with me. “It seems this ritual requires the death of a god.”

19

O book, what's my fate?
What is the secret of life?
See appendix F

WHY WAS EVERYBODY LOOKING at me?

I couldn't help it if I was the only (ex-)god in the room.

Reyna leaned over the scroll, tracing her finger across the parchment. "Frank copied these lines from Tyson's back. As you can probably guess, they read more like an instruction manual than a prophecy…."

I was about to crawl out of my skin. I wanted to rip the scroll away from Reyna and read the bad news myself. Was my name mentioned? Sacrificing *me* couldn't possibly please the gods, could it? If we Olympians started sacrificing one another, that would set a terrible precedent.

Meg eyed the jar of jelly beans, while the greyhounds eyed her. "Which god dies?"

"Well, that particular line…" Reyna squinted, then pushed the parchment over to Frank. "What is that word?"

Frank looked sheepish. "*Shattered.* Sorry, I was writing fast."

"No, no. It's fine. Your handwriting is better than mine."

"Can you please just tell me what it says?" I begged.

"Right, sorry," Reyna said. "Well, it's not exactly poetry, like the sonnet you got in Indianapolis—"

"Reyna!"

"Okay, okay. It says: *All to be done on the day of greatest need: gather the ingredients for a type-six burnt offering (see appendix B)—*"

“We’re doomed,” I wailed. “We’ll never be able to collect those… whatever they are.”

“That part’s easy,” Frank assured me. “Ella has the list of ingredients. She says it’s all ordinary stuff.” He gestured for Reyna to continue.

“*Add the last breath of the god who speaks not, once his soul is cut free,*” Reyna read aloud, “*together with the shattered glass. Then the single-deity summoning prayer (see appendix C) must be uttered through the rainbow*.” She took a breath. “We don’t have the actual text of that prayer yet, but Ella is confident she can transcribe it before the battle starts, now that she knows what to look for in appendix C.”

Frank glanced at me for a reaction. “Does the rest of it make any sense to you?”

I was so relieved I almost slumped off my three-legged stool. “You got me all worked up. I thought…Well, I’ve been called a lot of things, but never *the god who speaks not.* It sounds like we must find the soundless god, whom we’ve discussed before, and, er—”

“Kill him?” Reyna asked. “How would killing a god please the gods?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. Then again, many prophecies seemed illogical until they played out. Only in retrospect did they appear obvious.

“Perhaps if I knew which god we’re talking about…” I pounded my fist on my knee. “I feel like I should know, but it’s buried deep. An obscure memory. I don’t suppose you’ve checked your libraries or run a Google search or something?”

“Of course we looked,” Frank said. “There’s no listing for a Roman or Greek god of silence.”

Roman or Greek. I felt sure I was missing something—like part of my brain, for instance. *Last breath. His soul is cut free.* It definitely sounded like instructions for a sacrifice.

“I have to think on it,” I decided. “As for the rest of the instructions: *shattered glass* seems like an odd request, but I suppose we can find some easily enough.”

“We could break the jelly bean jar,” Meg suggested.

Reyna and Frank politely ignored her.

“And the *single-deity summoning* thing?” Frank asked. “I guess that means we won’t be getting a host of gods charging down in their chariots?”

“Probably not,” I agreed.

But my pulse quickened. The possibility of being able to speak to even *one* fellow Olympian after all this time—to summon actual grade AA– quality, jumbo, cage-free, locally sourced divine help…I found the idea both exhilarating and terrifying. Would I get to choose which god I called, or was it predetermined by the prayer? "Nevertheless, even one god can make all the difference."

Meg shrugged. "Depends on the god."

"That hurt," I said.

"What about the last line?" Reyna asked. "The prayer *must be uttered through the rainbow*."

"An Iris-message," I said, happy I could answer one question at least. "It's a Greek thing, a way of beseeching Iris, goddess of the rainbow, to carry a message—in this case, a prayer to Mount Olympus. The formula is quite simple."

"But…" Frank frowned. "Percy told me about Iris-messages. They don't work anymore, do they? Not since all our communications went silent."

Communications, I thought. *Silent. The soundless god.*

I felt as if I'd fallen into the deep end of a very cold pool. "Oh. I am so stupid."

Meg giggled, but she resisted the many sarcastic comments that no doubt were filling her mind.

I, in turn, resisted the urge to push her off her stool. "This soundless god, whoever he is…What if he's the *reason* our communications don't work? What if the Triumvirate has somehow been harnessing his power to prevent us all from talking to one another, and to keep us from beseeching the gods for help?"

Reyna crossed her arms, blocking out the word FUERTE on her T-shirt. "You're saying what, this soundless god is in cahoots with the Triumvirate? We have to kill him to open our means of communication? Then we could send an Iris-message, do the ritual, and get divine help? I'm still stuck on the whole *killing a god* thing."

I considered the Erythraean Sibyl, whom we'd rescued from her prison in the Burning Maze. "Perhaps this god isn't a willing participant. He might have been trapped, or…I don't know, coerced somehow."

"So we free him by killing him?" Frank asked. "Gotta agree with Reyna. That sounds harsh."

“One way to find out,” Meg said. “We go to this Sutro place. Can I feed your dogs?”

Without waiting for permission, she grabbed the jelly bean jar and popped it open.

Aurum and Argentum, having heard the magic words *feed* and *dogs,* did not growl or tear Meg apart. They got up, moved to her side, and sat watching her, their jeweled eyes sending the message *Please, please, please*.

Meg doled out a jelly bean for each dog, then ate two herself. Two for the dogs, two for herself. Meg had achieved a major diplomatic breakthrough.

“Meg’s right. Sutro is the place Tarquin’s minion mentioned,” I recalled. “Presumably we’ll find the soundless god there.”

“Mount Sutro?” Reyna asked. “Or Sutro Tower? Did he say which?”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it the same place? I always just call that area Sutro Hill.”

“Actually, the biggest hill is Mount Sutro,” said Reyna. “The giant antenna is on a different hill right next to it. That’s Sutro Tower. I only know this because Aurum and Argentum like to go hiking over there.”

The greyhounds turned their heads at the word *hiking*, then went back to studying Meg’s hand in the jelly bean jar. I tried to imagine Reyna hiking with her dogs just for fun. I wondered if Lavinia knew that was her pastime. Maybe Lavinia was such a dedicated hiker because she was trying to outdo the praetor, the same way she had her thinking spot high above Reyna’s.

Then I decided that trying to psychoanalyze my pink-haired, tap-dancing, manubalista-wielding friend was probably a losing proposition.

“Is this Sutro place close?” Meg was slowly depleting all the green jelly beans, which was giving her a different sort of green thumb than usual.

“It’s across the bay in San Francisco,” Reyna said. “The tower is massive. You can see it from all over the Bay Area.”

“Weird place to keep someone,” Frank said. “But I guess no weirder than under a carousel.”

I tried to remember if I’d ever been to Sutro Tower, or any of the other various Sutro-labeled places in that vicinity. Nothing came to mind, but the instructions from the Sibylline Books had left me deeply unsettled. The last breath of a god was not an ingredient most ancient Roman temples kept in their pantries. And cutting a god’s soul free *really* was not something Romans were supposed to try without adult supervision.

If the soundless god was part of the Triumvirate's scheme for control, why would Tarquin have access to him? What had Tarquin meant by "doubling the flock" to guard the god's location? And what he'd said about the Sibyl—*I hope the Sibyl lasts long enough to see you humbled. That may be what finally breaks her.* Had he just been messing with my mind? If the Sibyl of Cumae was truly still alive, a captive of Tarquin, I was obligated to help her.

Help her, the cynical part of my mind responded. *Like you helped her before?*

"Wherever the soundless god is," I said, "he'll be heavily protected, especially now. Tarquin must know we'll try to locate the hiding place."

"And we have to do so on April eighth," said Reyna. "*The day of greatest need.*"

Frank grunted. "Good thing we don't have anything else scheduled that day. Like getting invaded on two fronts, for instance."

"My gods, Meg," Reyna said, "you're going to make yourself sick. I'll never get all the sugar out of Aurum and Argentum's gear works."

"Fine." Meg put the jelly bean jar back on the table, but not before grabbing one last fistful for herself and her canine accomplices. "So we have to wait until the day after tomorrow? What'll we do until then?"

"Oh, we've got plenty to do," Frank promised. "Planning. Constructing defenses. War games all day tomorrow. We have to run the legion through every possible scenario. Besides…"

His voice faltered, as if he'd realized he was about to say something aloud that was best left in his head. His hand drifted toward the pouch where he held his firewood.

I wondered if he'd taken any additional notes from Ella and Tyson—perhaps more harpy ramblings about bridges, fires, and something, something, something. If so, Frank apparently didn't want to share.

"Besides," he started over, "you guys should rest up for the quest. You'll have to leave for Sutro early on Lester's birthday."

"Can we please not call it that?" I pleaded.

"Also, who is 'you guys'?" Reyna asked. "We may need another senate vote to decide who goes on the quest."

"Nah," Frank said. "I mean, we can check with the senators, but this is clearly an extension of the original mission, right? Besides, when we're at war, you and I have full executive power."

Reyna regarded her colleague. “Why, Frank Zhang. You’ve been studying the praetors’ handbook.”

“Maybe a little.” Frank cleared his throat. “Anyway, we know who needs to go: Apollo, Meg, and you. The doorway to the soundless god has to be opened by Bellona’s daughter, right?”

“But…” Reyna looked back and forth between us. “I can’t just leave on the day of a major battle. Bellona’s power is all about strength in numbers. I need to lead the troops.”

“And you will,” Frank promised. “As soon as you get back from San Francisco. In the meantime, I’ll hold down the fort. I’ve got this.”

Reyna hesitated, but I thought I detected a gleam in her eye. “Are you sure, Frank? I mean, yeah, of course you can do it. I know you can, but—”

“I’ll be fine.” Frank smiled like he meant it. “Apollo and Meg need you on this quest. Go.”

Why did Reyna look so excited? How crushing her work must have been, if, after carrying the burden of leadership for so long, she was looking forward to going on an adventure across the bay to kill a god.

“I suppose,” she said with obviously feigned reluctance.

“It’s settled, then.” Frank turned to Meg and me. “You guys rest up. Big day tomorrow. We’ll need your help with the war games. I’ve got a special job in mind for each of you.”

20

Hamster ball of death
Spare me your fiery doom
I'm not feeling it

OH, BOY, A SPECIAL job!

The anticipation was killing me. Or maybe that was the poison in my veins.

As soon as I returned to the coffee shop's attic, I crashed on my cot.

Meg huffed, "It's still light outside. You slept all day."

"Not turning into a zombie is hard work."

"I know!" she snapped. "I'm sorry!"

I looked up, surprised by her tone. Meg kicked an old paper latte cup across the room. She plopped onto her cot and glared at the floor.

"Meg?"

In her flower box, irises grew with such speed that their flowers crackled open like corn kernels. Just a few minutes ago, Meg had been happily insulting me and gorging on jelly beans. Now…Was she *crying*?

"Meg." I sat up, trying not to wince. "Meg, you're not responsible for me getting hurt."

She twisted the ring on her right hand, then the one on her left, as if they'd become too small for her fingers. "I just thought…if I could kill him…" She wiped her nose. "Like in some stories. You kill the master, and you can free the people he's turned."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. I was pretty sure the dynamic she was describing applied to vampires, not zombies, but I understood what

she meant.

"You're talking about Tarquin," I said. "You jumped into the throne room because…you wanted to save me?"

"Duh," she muttered, without any heat.

I put my hand over my bandaged abdomen. I'd been so angry with Meg for her recklessness in the tomb. I'd assumed she was just being impulsive, reacting to Tarquin's plans to let the Bay Area burn. But she'd leaped into battle for *me*—with the hope that she could kill Tarquin and erase my curse. That was even *before* I'd realized how bad my condition was. Meg must have been more worried, or more intuitive, than she'd let on.

Which certainly took all the fun out of criticizing her.

"Oh, Meg." I shook my head. "That was a crazy, senseless stunt, and I love you for it. But don't beat yourself up. Pranjal's medicine bought me some extra time. And you did, too, of course, with your cheese-grating skills and your magical chickweed. You've done everything you could. When we summon godly help, I can ask for complete healing. I'm sure I'll be as good as new. Or at least, as good as a Lester can be."

Meg tilted her head, making her crooked glasses just about horizontal. "How can you know? Is this god going to give us three wishes or something?"

I considered that. When my followers called, had I ever shown up and granted them three wishes? LOL, nope. Maybe *one* wish, if that wish was something I wanted to happen anyway. And if this ritual only allowed me to call one god, who would it be—assuming I could even choose? Perhaps my son Asclepius would be able to heal me, but he couldn't very well fight the Roman emperors' forces and the hordes of undead. Mars might grant us success on the battlefield, but he'd look at my wound and say something like *Yeah, rough break. Die bravely!*

Here I was with purple lines of infection snaking down my arms, telling Meg not to worry.

"I don't know, Meg," I confessed. "You're right. I can't be sure everything will be okay. But I *can* promise you I'm not giving up. We've come this far. I'm not going to let a belly scratch stop us from defeating the Triumvirate."

She had so much mucus dripping from her nostrils, she would've made Buster the unicorn proud. She sniffled, wiping her upper lip with her knuckle. "I don't want to lose somebody else."

My mental gears weren't turning at full speed. I had trouble wrapping my mind around the fact that by "somebody else," Meg meant *me*.

I recalled one of her early memories, which I'd witnessed in my dreams: she'd been forced to gaze upon her father's lifeless body on the steps of Grand Central Station while Nero, his murderer, hugged her and promised to take care of her.

I remembered how she'd betrayed me to Nero in the Grove of Dodona out of fear of the Beast, Nero's dark side, and how horrible she'd felt afterward, when we reunited in Indianapolis. Then she'd taken all her displaced anger and guilt and frustration and projected it onto Caligula (which, to be honest, was a pretty good place to put it). Meg, being unable to lash out at Nero, had wanted so badly to kill Caligula. When Jason died instead, she was devastated.

Now, aside from all the bad memories the Roman trappings of Camp Jupiter might have triggered for her, she was faced with the prospect of losing me. In a moment of shock, like a unicorn staring me right in the face, I realized that despite all the grief Meg gave me, and the way she ordered me around, she cared for me. For the past three months, I had been her one constant friend, just as she had been mine.

The only other person who might have come close was Peaches, Meg's fruit-tree spirit minion, and we hadn't seen him since Indianapolis. At first, I'd assumed Peaches was just being temperamental about when he decided to appear, like most supernatural creatures. But if he *had* tried to follow us to Palm Springs, where even the cacti struggled to survive…I didn't relish a peach tree's odds of survival there, much less in the Burning Maze.

Meg hadn't mentioned Peaches to me once since we were in the Labyrinth. Now I realized his absence must have been weighing on her, along with all her other worries.

What a horribly insufficient friend I had been.

"Come here." I held out my arms. "Please?"

Meg hesitated. Still sniffling, she rose from her cot and trudged toward me. She fell into my hug like I was a comfy mattress. I grunted, surprised by how solid and heavy she was. She smelled of apple peels and mud, but I didn't mind. I didn't even mind the mucus and tears soaking my shoulder.

I'd always wondered what it would be like to have a younger sibling. Sometimes I'd treated Artemis as my baby sister, since I'd been born a few minutes earlier, but that had been mostly to annoy her. With Meg, I felt as if

it were actually true. I had someone who depended on me, who needed me around no matter how much we irritated each other. I thought about Hazel and Frank and the washing away of curses. I supposed that kind of love could come from many different types of relationships.

"Okay." Meg pushed herself away, wiping her cheeks furiously. "Enough of that. You sleep. I'm—I'm going to get dinner or whatever."

For a long time after she left, I lay in my cot staring at the ceiling.

Music floated up from the café: the soothing sounds of Horace Silver's piano, punctuated by the hiss of the espresso machine, accompanying Bombilo singing in two-headed harmony. After spending a few days with these noises, I found them soothing, even homey. I drifted off to sleep, hoping to have warm, fuzzy dreams about Meg and me skipping through sunlit fields with our elephant, unicorn, and metal greyhound friends.

Instead, I found myself back with the emperors.

On my list of places I least wanted to be, Caligula's yacht ranked right up there with Tarquin's tomb, the eternal abyss of Chaos, and the Limburger cheese factory in Liège, Belgium, where stinking gym socks went to feel better about themselves.

Commodus lounged in a deck chair, an aluminum tanning bib around his neck reflecting the afternoon sun directly onto his face. Sunglasses covered his scarred eyes. He wore only pink swim trunks and pink Crocs. I took absolutely no notice of the way the tanning oil glistened on his muscular bronzed body.

Caligula stood nearby in his captain's uniform: white coat, dark slacks, and striped shirt, all crisply pressed. His cruel face looked almost angelic as he marveled at the contraption that now took up the entire aft deck. The artillery mortar was the size of an aboveground swimming pool, with a two-foot-thick rim of dark iron and a diameter wide enough to drive a car through. Nestled in the barrel, a massive green sphere glowed like a giant radioactive hamster ball.

Pandai rushed around the deck, blanket ears flopping, their furry hands moving at preternatural speeds as they plugged in cables and oiled gears at the base of the weapon. Some of the pandai were young enough to have pure white fur, which made my heart hurt, reminding me of my brief friendship with Crest, the youthful aspiring musician who'd lost his life in the Burning Maze.

“It’s wonderful!” Caligula beamed, circling the mortar. “Is it ready for test-firing?”

“Yes, lord!” said the pandos Boost. “Of course, every sphere of Greek fire is very, very expensive, so—”

“DO IT!” Caligula yelled.

Boost yelped and scrambled to the control panel.

Greek fire. I hated the stuff, and I was a sun god who rode a fiery chariot. Viscous, green, and impossible to extinguish, Greek fire was just plain nasty. A cupful could burn down an entire building, and that single glowing sphere held more than I’d ever seen in one place.

“Oh, Commodus?” Caligula called. “You might want to pay attention to this.”

“I am fully attentive,” Commodus said, turning his face to better catch the sun.

Caligula sighed. “Boost, you may proceed.”

Boost called out instructions in his own language. His fellow pandai turned cranks and spun dials, slowly swiveling the mortar until it pointed out to sea. Boost double-checked his readings on the control panel, then shouted, *“U¯nus, duo, tre¯s!”*

With a mighty *boom,* the mortar fired. The entire boat shuddered from the recoil. The giant hamster ball rocketed upward until it was a green marble in the sky, then plummeted toward the western horizon. The sky blazed emerald. A moment later, hot winds buffeted the ship with the smell of burning salt and cooked fish. In the distance, a geyser of green fire churned on the boiling sea.

“Ooh, pretty.” Caligula grinned at Boost. “And you have one missile for each ship?”

“Yes, lord. As instructed.”

“The range?”

“Once we clear Treasure Island, we’ll be able to bring all weapons to bear on Camp Jupiter, my lord. No magical defenses can stop such a massive volley. Total annihilation!”

“Good,” Caligula said. “That’s my favorite kind.”

“But remember,” Commodus called from his deck chair, having not even turned to watch the explosion, “first we try a ground assault. Maybe they’ll be wise and surrender! We want New Rome intact and the harpy and Cyclops taken alive, if possible.”

“Yes, yes,” Caligula said. “If possible.”

He seemed to savor those words like a beautiful lie. His eyes glittered in the green artificial sunset. “Either way, this will be fun.”

I woke up alone, the sun baking my face. For a second I thought I might be in a deck chair next to Commodus, a tanning bib around my neck. But no. The days when Commodus and I hung out together were long gone.

I sat up, groggy, disoriented, and dehydrated. Why was it still light outside?

Then I realized, judging from the angle of the sun coming in the room, it must have been about noon. Once again, I’d slept through the night and half a day. I still felt exhausted.

I pressed gently on my bandaged gut. I was horrified to find the wound tender again. The purple lines of infection had darkened. This could only mean one thing: it was time for a long-sleeved shirt. No matter what happened over the next twenty-four hours, I would not add to Meg’s worries. I would tough it out until the moment I keeled over.

Wow. Who even was I?

By the time I changed clothes and hobbled out of Bombilo’s coffee shop, most of the legion had gathered at the mess hall for lunch. As usual, the dining room bustled with activity. Demigods, grouped by cohort, reclined on couches around low tables while aurae whisked overhead with platters of food and pitchers of drink. Hanging from the cedar rafters, war-game pennants and cohort standards rippled in the constant breeze. When they’d finished eating, diners rose cautiously and walked away hunched over, lest they get decapitated by a flying plate of cold cuts. Except for the Lares, of course. They didn’t care what sort of delicacies flew through their ectoplasmic noggins.

I spotted Frank at the officers’ table, deep in conversation with Hazel and the rest of the centurions. Reyna was nowhere in sight—perhaps she was catching a nap or preparing for the afternoon’s war drills. Given what we were facing tomorrow, Frank looked remarkably relaxed. As he chatted with his officers, he even cracked a smile, which seemed to put the others at ease.

How simple it would be to destroy their fragile confidence, I thought, just by describing the flotilla of artillery yachts I’d seen in my dream. Not yet, I decided. No sense spoiling their meal.

“Hey, Lester!” Lavinia yelled from across the room, waving me over as if I were her waiter.

I joined her and Meg at the Fifth Cohort table. An aura deposited a goblet of water in my hand, then left a whole pitcher on the table. Apparently, my dehydration was that obvious.

Lavinia leaned forward, her eyebrows arched like pink-and-chestnut rainbows. “So, is it true?”

I frowned at Meg, wondering which of the many embarrassing stories about me she might have shared. She was too busy plowing through a row of hot dogs to pay me any mind.

“Is what true?” I asked.

“The shoes.”

“Shoes?”

Lavinia threw her hands in the air. “The dancing shoes of Terpsichore! Meg was telling us what happened on Caligula’s yachts. She said you and that Piper girl saw a pair of Terpsichore’s shoes!”

“Oh.” I had completely forgotten about those, or the fact that I’d told Meg about them. Strange, but the other events aboard Caligula’s ships—getting captured, seeing Jason killed before our eyes, barely escaping with our lives—had eclipsed my memories of the emperor’s footwear collection.

“Meg,” I said, “of all the things you could have chosen to tell them, you told them about *that*?”

“Wasn’t my idea.” Meg somehow managed to enunciate with half a hot dog in her mouth. “Lavinia likes shoes.”

“Well, what did you think I was going to ask about?” Lavinia demanded. “You tell me the emperor has an entire boatload of shoes, of course I’m going to wonder if you saw any dancing ones! So it’s true, then, Lester?”

“I mean…yes. We saw a pair of—”

“Wow.” Lavinia sat back, crossed her arms, and glared at me. “Just *wow*. You wait until now to tell me this? Do you know how rare those shoes are? How important…” She seemed to choke on her own indignation. “Wow.”

Around the table, Lavinia’s comrades showed a mixture of reactions. Some rolled their eyes, some smirked, some kept eating as if nothing Lavinia did could surprise them anymore.

An older boy with shaggy brown hair dared to stick up for me. “Lavinia, Apollo has had a few other things going on.”

“Oh, my gods, Thomas!” Lavinia shot back. “Naturally, you wouldn’t understand! You never take off those boots!”

Thomas frowned at his standard-issue combat stompers. “What? They’ve got good arch support.”

“Yeesh.” Lavinia turned to Meg. “We have to figure out a way to get aboard that ship and rescue those shoes.”

“Nah.” Meg sucked a glob of relish off her thumb. “Way too dangerous.”

“But—”

“Lavinia,” I interrupted, “you *can’t*.”

She must have heard the fear and urgency in my voice. Over the past few days, I had developed a strange fondness for Lavinia. I didn’t want to see her charge into a slaughter, especially after my dream about those mortars primed with Greek fire.

She ran her Star of David pendant back and forth on its chain. “You’ve got new information? Dish.”

Before I could reply, a plate of food flew into my hands. The aurae had decided I needed chicken fingers and fries. Lots of them. Either that or they’d heard the word *dish* and taken it as an order.

A moment later, Hazel and the other Fifth Cohort centurion joined us—a dark-haired young man with strange red stains around his mouth. Ah, yes. Dakota, child of Bacchus.

“What’s going on?” Dakota asked.

“Lester has news.” Lavinia stared at me expectantly, as if I might be withholding the location of Terpsichore’s magical tutu (which, for the record, I hadn’t seen in centuries).

I took a deep breath. I wasn’t sure if this was the right forum for sharing my dream. I should probably report it to the praetors first. But Hazel nodded at me as if to say, *Go on.* I decided that was good enough.

I described what I’d seen—a top-of-the-line IKEA heavy mortar, fully assembled, shooting a giant hamster ball of green flaming death that blew up the Pacific Ocean. I explained that, apparently, the emperors had fifty such mortars, one on each ship, which would be ready to obliterate Camp Jupiter as soon as they took up positions in the bay.

Dakota’s face turned as red as his mouth. “I need more Kool-Aid.”

The fact that no goblets flew into his hand told me the aurae disagreed.

Lavinia looked like she’d been slapped with one of her mother’s ballet slippers. Meg kept eating hot dogs as if they might be the last ones she

would ever get.

Hazel chewed her bottom lip in concentration, perhaps trying to extract any good news from what I'd said. She seemed to find this harder than pulling diamonds from the ground.

"Okay, look, guys, we knew the emperors were assembling secret weapons. At least now we know what those weapons are. I'll convey this information to the praetors, but it doesn't change anything. You all did a great job in the morning drills"—she hesitated, then generously decided not to add *except for Apollo, who slept through it all*—"and this afternoon, one of our war games will be about boarding enemy ships. We can get prepared."

From the expressions around the table, I gathered the Fifth Cohort was not reassured. The Romans had never been known for their naval prowess. Last I'd checked, the Camp Jupiter "navy" consisted of some old *triremes* they only used for mock naval battles in the Colosseum, and one rowboat they kept docked in Alameda. Drilling to board enemy ships would be less about practicing a workable battle plan and more about keeping the legionnaires busy so they wouldn't think about their impending doom.

Thomas rubbed his forehead. "I hate my life."

"Keep it together, legionnaire," Hazel said. "This is what we signed up for. Defending the legacy of Rome."

"From its own emperors," Thomas said miserably.

"I'm sorry to tell you," I put in, "but the biggest threat to the empire was often its own emperors."

Nobody argued.

At the officers' table, Frank Zhang stood. All around the room, flying pitchers and platters froze in midair, waiting respectfully.

"Legionnaires!" Frank announced, managing a confident smile. "Relay activities will recommence on the Field of Mars in twenty minutes. Drill like your lives depend on it, because they do!"

21

See this right here, kids?
This is how you don't do it.
Questions? Class dismissed.

"HOW'S THE WOUND?" HAZEL asked.

I knew she meant well, but I was getting very tired of that question, and even more tired of the wound.

We walked side by side out the main gates, heading for the Field of Mars. Just ahead of us, Meg cartwheeled down the road, though how she did this without regurgitating the four hot dogs she'd eaten, I had no idea.

"Oh, you know," I said, in a terrible attempt to sound upbeat, "all things considered, I'm okay."

My old immortal self would have laughed at that. *Okay? Are you joking?*

Over the last few months, I had drastically scaled back my expectations. At this point, *okay* meant *still able to walk and breathe*.

"I should have realized earlier," Hazel said. "Your death aura is getting stronger by the hour—"

"Can we not talk about my death aura?"

"Sorry, it's just…I wish Nico were here. He might know how to fix you."

I wouldn't have minded seeing Hazel's half brother. Nico di Angelo, son of Hades, had been quite valuable when we fought Nero at Camp Half-Blood. And of course his boyfriend, my son Will Solace, was an excellent healer. Yet I suspected they wouldn't be able to help me any more than Pranjal had. If Will and Nico were here, they would just be two more people

for me to worry about—two more loved ones watching me with concern, wondering how long until I went full-on zombie.

"I appreciate the sentiment," I said, "but…What is Lavinia doing?"

About a hundred yards away, Lavinia and Don the faun stood on a bridge across the Little Tiber—which was very much *not* on the way to the Field of Mars—having what looked like a serious argument. Perhaps I shouldn't have brought this to Hazel's attention. Then again, if Lavinia wanted to go unnoticed, she should have chosen a different hair color—like camouflage, for instance—and not waved her arms around so much.

"I don't know." Hazel's expression reminded me of a tired mother who had found her toddler trying to climb into the monkey exhibit for the dozenth time. "Lavinia!"

Lavinia looked over. She patted the air as if to say, *Just give me a minute*, then went back to arguing with Don.

"Am I too young to get ulcers?" Hazel wondered aloud.

I had little occasion for humor, given all that was happening, but that comment made me laugh.

As we got closer to the Field of Mars, I saw legionnaires breaking into cohorts, moving to different activities spread across the wasteland. One group was digging defensive trenches. Another had gathered on the shore of an artificial lake that hadn't been there yesterday, waiting to board two makeshift boats that looked nothing like Caligula's yachts. A third group sledded down a dirt hill on their shields.

Hazel sighed. "That would be my group of delinquents. If you'll excuse me, I'm off to teach them how to slay ghouls."

She jogged away, leaving me alone with my cartwheeling sidekick.

"So where do we go?" I asked Meg. "Frank said we had, er, special jobs?"

"Yep." Meg pointed to the far end of the field, where the Fifth Cohort was waiting at a target range. "You're teaching archery."

I stared at her. "I'm doing *what* now?"

"Frank taught the morning class, since you slept *forever*. Now it's your turn."

"But—I can't teach as Lester, especially in my condition! Besides, Romans never rely on archery in combat. They think projectile weapons are beneath them!"

“Gotta think in new ways if you want to beat the emperors,” Meg said. “Like me. I’m weaponizing the unicorns.”

“You’re—Wait, what?”

“Later.” Meg skipped across the field toward a large riding ring, where the First Cohort and a herd of unicorns were staring suspiciously at one another. I couldn’t imagine how Meg planned to weaponize the nonviolent creatures, or who had given her permission to try, but I had a sudden horrible image of Romans and unicorns assaulting one another with large cheese graters. I decided to mind my own business.

With a sigh, I turned toward the firing range and went to meet my new pupils.

The only thing scarier than being bad at archery was discovering that I was suddenly good at it again. That may not sound like a problem, but since becoming mortal, I’d experienced a few random bursts of godly skill. Each time, my powers had quickly evaporated again, leaving me more bitter and disillusioned than ever.

Sure, I may have fired a quiverful of amazing shots in Tarquin’s tomb. That didn’t mean I could do it again. If I tried to demonstrate proper shooting techniques in front of a whole cohort and ended up hitting one of Meg’s unicorns in the butt, I would die of embarrassment long before the zombie poison got me.

“Okay, everyone,” I said. “I suppose we can start.”

Dakota was rummaging through his water-stained quiver, trying to find an arrow that wasn’t warped. Apparently, he thought it was a great idea to store his archery supplies in the sauna. Thomas and another legionnaire (Marcus?) were sword-fighting with their bows. The legion’s standard-bearer, Jacob, was drawing his bow with the butt of the arrow directly at eye level, which explained why his left eye was covered in a patch from the morning’s lessons. He now seemed eager to blind himself completely.

“C’mon, guys!” said Lavinia. She had sneaked in late without being noticed (one of her superpowers) and took it upon herself to help me call the troops to order. “Apollo might know stuff!”

This was how I knew I had hit rock bottom: the highest praise I could receive from a mortal was that I “might know stuff.”

I cleared my throat. I’d faced much bigger audiences. Why was I so nervous? Oh, right. Because I was a horribly incompetent sixteen-year-old.

“So…let’s talk about how to aim.” My voice cracked, naturally. “Wide stance. Full draw. Then find your target with your dominant eye. Or, in Jacob’s case, with your one working eye. Aim along your sight pin, if you have one.”

“I don’t have a sight pin,” said Marcus.

“It’s the little circle thingie right there.” Lavinia showed him.

“I have a sight pin,” Marcus corrected himself.

“Then you let fly,” I said. “Like this.”

I shot at the nearest target—then at the target next farthest out, then at the next—firing again and again in a kind of trance.

Only after my twentieth shot did I realize I’d landed all bull’s-eyes, two in each target, the farthest about two hundred yards away. Child’s play for Apollo. For Lester, quite impossible.

The legionnaires stared at me, their mouths hanging open.

“We’re supposed to do *that*?” Dakota demanded.

Lavinia punched my forearm. “See, you guys? I told you Apollo doesn’t suck that much!”

I had to agree with her. I felt oddly *not* suckish.

The display of marksmanship hadn’t drained my energy. Nor did it feel like the temporary bursts of godly power I’d experienced before. I was tempted to ask for another quiver to see if I could keep shooting at the same skill level, but I was afraid to press my luck.

“So…” I faltered. “I, uh, don’t expect you to be that good right away. I was only demonstrating what’s possible with a lot of practice. Let’s give it a try, shall we?”

I was relieved to take the focus off myself. I organized the cohort into a firing line and made my way down the ranks, offering advice. Despite his warped arrows, Dakota was not terrible. He actually hit the target a few times. Jacob managed not to blind himself in the other eye. Thomas and Marcus sent most of their arrows skittering across the dirt, ricocheting off rocks and into the trenches, which elicited shouts of “Hey, watch it!” from the ditch-digging Fourth Cohort.

After an hour of frustration with a regular bow, Lavinia gave up and pulled out her manubalista. Her first bolt knocked down the fifty-yard target.

“Why do you insist on using that slow-loading monstrosity?” I asked. “If you’re so ADHD, wouldn’t a regular bow give you more instant satisfaction?”

Lavinia shrugged. “Maybe, but the manubalista makes a statement. Speaking of which”—she leaned toward me, her expression turning serious—“I need to talk to you.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it’s not. I—”

In the distance, a horn blew.

“Okay, guys!” Dakota called. “Time to rotate activities! Good team effort!”

Lavinia punched me in the arm again. “Later, Lester.”

The Fifth Cohort dropped their weapons and ran toward the next activity, leaving me to retrieve all their arrows. Cretins.

The rest of the afternoon, I stayed at the firing range, working with each cohort in turn. As the hours wore on, both the shooting and the teaching became less intimidating for me. By the time I was wrapping up work with my last group, the First Cohort, I was convinced that my improved archery skills were here to stay.

I didn’t know why. I still couldn’t shoot at my old godly level, but I was definitely better now than the average demigod archer or Olympic gold medalist. I had started to “jive.” I considered pulling out the Arrow of Dodona to brag *See what I can do?* But I didn’t want to jinx myself. Besides, knowing that I was dying of zombie poison on the eve of a major battle took some of the thrill out of being able to shoot bull’s-eyes again.

The Romans were duly impressed. Some of them even learned a little, like how to fire an arrow without blinding yourself or killing the guy next to you. Still, I could tell they were more excited about the other activities they’d done. I overheard a lot of whispering about unicorns and Hazel’s supersecret ghoul-fighting techniques. Larry from the Third Cohort had enjoyed boarding ships so much he declared that he wanted to be a pirate when he grew up. I suspected most of the legionnaires had even enjoyed ditch-digging more than my class.

It was late evening when the final horn blew and the cohorts tromped back to camp. I was hungry and exhausted. I wondered if this was how mortal teachers felt after a full day of classes. If so, I didn’t see how they managed. I hoped they were richly compensated with gold, diamonds, and rare spices.

At least the cohorts seemed to be in an upbeat mood. If the praetors’ goal had been to take the troops’ minds off their fears and raise morale on the eve

of battle, then our afternoon had been a success. If the goal had been to train the legion to successfully repel our enemies…then I was less than hopeful. Also, all day long, everyone had carefully avoided addressing the worst thing about tomorrow's attack. The Romans would have to face their former comrades, returned as zombies under Tarquin's control. I remembered how hard it had been for Lavinia to shoot down Bobby with her crossbow in the tomb. I wondered how the legion's morale would hold up once they faced the same ethical dilemma times fifty or sixty.

I was turning onto the Via Principalis, on my way to the mess hall, when a voice said, "Pssst."

Lurking in the alley between Bombilo's café and the chariot repair shop were Lavinia and Don. The faun was wearing an honest-to-gods trench coat over his tie-dyed T-shirt, as if that made him look inconspicuous. Lavinia wore a black cap over her pink hair.

"C'mere!" she hissed.

"But dinner—"

"We need you."

"Is this a mugging?"

She marched over, grabbed my arm, and pulled me into the shadows.

"Don't worry, dude," Don told me. "It's not a mugging! But, like, if you *do* have any spare change—"

"Shut up, Don," said Lavinia.

"I'll shut up," Don agreed.

"Lester," Lavinia said, "you need to come with us."

"Lavinia, I'm tired. I'm hungry. And I have no spare change. Can't it please wait—?"

"No. Because tomorrow we might all die, and this is important. We're sneaking out."

"Sneaking out?"

"Yeah," Don said. "It's when you're sneaking. And you go out."

"Why?" I demanded.

"You'll see." Lavinia's tone was ominous, as if she couldn't explain what my coffin looked like. I had to admire it with my own eyes.

"What if we get caught?"

"Oh!" Don perked up. "I know this one! For a first offense, it's latrine duty for a month. But, see, if we all die tomorrow, it won't matter!"

With that happy news, Lavinia and Don grabbed my hands and dragged me farther into the darkness.

22

I sing of dead plants
And heroic shrubberies
Inspiring stuff

SNEAKING OUT OF A Roman military camp should not have been so easy.

Once we were safely through a hole in the fence, down a trench, through a tunnel, past the pickets, and out of sight of the camp's sentry towers, Don was happy to explain how he'd arranged it all. "Dude, the place is designed to keep out armies. It's not meant to keep in individual legionnaires, or keep out, you know, the occasional well-meaning faun who's just looking for a hot meal. If you know the patrol schedule and are willing to keep changing up your entry points, it's easy."

"That seems remarkably industrious for a faun," I noted.

Don grinned. "Hey, man. Slacking is hard work."

"We've got a long walk," Lavinia said. "Best keep moving."

I tried not to groan. Another nighttime hike with Lavinia had not been on my evening's agenda. But I had to admit I was curious. What had she and Don been arguing about before? Why had she wanted to talk to me earlier? And where were we going? With her stormy eyes and the black cap over her hair, Lavinia looked troubled and determined, less like a gawky giraffe, more like a tense gazelle. I'd seen her father, Sergei Asimov, perform once with the Moscow Ballet. He'd had that exact expression on his face before launching into a grand jeté.

I wanted to ask Lavinia what was going on, but her posture made it clear she was not in the mood for conversation. Not yet, anyway. We hiked in silence out of the valley and down into the streets of Berkeley.

It must have been about midnight by the time we got to People's Park.

I had not been there since 1969, when I'd stopped by to experience some groovy hippie music and flower power and instead found myself in the middle of a riot. The police officers' tear gas, shotguns, and batons had definitely *not* been groovy. It had taken all my godly restraint not to reveal my divine form and blast everyone within a six-mile radius to cinders.

Now, decades later, the scruffy park looked like it was still suffering from the aftermath. The worn brown lawn was strewn with piles of discarded clothing and cardboard signs bearing hand-painted slogans like GREEN SPACE NOT DORM SPACE and SAVE OUR PARK. Several tree stumps held potted plants and beaded necklaces, like shrines to the fallen. Trash cans overflowed. Homeless people slept on benches or fussed over shopping carts full of their worldly belongings.

At the far end of the square, occupying a raised plywood stage, was the largest sit-in of dryads and fauns I'd ever seen. It made total sense to me that fauns would inhabit People's Park. They could laze around, panhandle, eat leftover food out of the garbage bins, and no one would bat an eye. The dryads were more of a surprise. At least two dozen of them were present. Some, I guessed, were the spirits of local eucalyptus and redwood trees, but most, given their sickly appearances, must have been dryads of the park's long-suffering shrubs, grasses, and weeds. (Not that I am judging weed dryads. I've known some very fine crabgrasses.)

The fauns and dryads sat in a wide circle as if preparing for a sing-along around an invisible campfire. I got the feeling they were waiting for us—for *me*—to start the music.

I was already nervous enough. Then I spotted a familiar face and nearly jumped out of my zombie-infected skin. *"Peaches?"*

Meg's demon-baby *karpos* bared his fangs and responded, "Peaches!"

His tree-branch wings had lost a few leaves. His curly green hair was dead brown at the tips, and his lamplike eyes didn't shine as brightly as I remembered. He must've undergone quite an ordeal tracking us to Northern California, but his growl was still intimidating enough to make me fear for my bladder control.

"Where have you *been*?" I demanded.

“Peaches!”

I felt foolish for asking. Of course he had been *peaches,* probably because *peaches, peaches,* and *peaches.* “Does Meg know you’re here? How did you—?”

Lavinia gripped my shoulder. “Hey, Apollo. Time is short. Peaches filled us in on what he saw in Southern California, but he arrived there too late to help. He busted his wings to get up here as fast as he could. He wants you to tell the group firsthand what happened in SoCal.”

I scanned the faces in the crowd. The nature spirits looked scared, apprehensive, and angry—but mostly tired of being angry. I’d seen that look a lot among dryads in these latter days of human civilization. There was only so much pollution your average plant can breathe, drink, and get tangled in her branches before starting to lose all hope.

Now Lavinia wanted me to break their spirits completely by relating what had happened to their brethren in Los Angeles, and what fiery destruction was coming their way tomorrow. In other words, she wanted to get me killed by a mob of angry shrubs.

I gulped. “Um…”

“Here. This might help.” Lavinia slung her backpack off her shoulder. I hadn’t paid much attention to how bulky it looked, since she was always tromping around with lots of gear. When she opened it, the last thing I expected her to pull out was my ukulele—newly polished and restrung.

“How…?” I asked, as she placed it in my hands.

“I stole it from your room,” she said, as if this was obviously what friends did for each other. “You were asleep forever. I took it to a buddy of mine who repairs instruments—Marilyn, daughter of Euterpe. You know, the Muse of Music.”

“I—I know Euterpe. Of course. Her specialty is flutes, not ukuleles. But the action on this fret board is perfect now. Marilyn must be…I’m so…” I realized I was rambling. “Thank you.”

Lavinia fixed me with her stare, silently commanding me to make her effort worthwhile. She stepped back and joined the circle of nature spirits.

I strummed. Lavinia was right. The instrument helped. Not to hide behind—as I’d discovered, one cannot hide behind a ukulele. But it lent confidence to my voice. After a few mournful minor chords, I began to sing “The Fall of Jason Grace,” as I had when we first arrived at Camp Jupiter.

The song quickly morphed, however. Like all good performers, I adapted the material to my audience.

I sang of the wildfires and droughts that had scorched Southern California. I sang of the brave cacti and satyrs from the Cistern in Palm Springs, who had struggled valiantly to find the source of the destruction. I sang of the dryads Agave and Money Maker, both gravely injured in the Burning Maze, and how Money Maker had died in the arms of Aloe Vera. I added some hopeful stanzas about Meg and the rebirth of the warrior dryad Meliai—how we'd destroyed the Burning Maze and given SoCal's environment at least a fighting chance to heal. But I couldn't hide the dangers that faced us. I described what I had seen in my dreams: the yachts approaching with their fiery mortars, the hellish devastation they would rain upon the entire Bay Area.

After strumming my final chord, I looked up. Green tears glistened in the dryads' eyes. Fauns wept openly.

Peaches turned to the crowd and growled, "Peaches!"

This time, I was fairly sure I understood his meaning: *See? I told you so!*

Don sniffled, wiping his eyes with what looked like a used burrito wrapper. "It's true, then. It's happening. Faunus protect us…"

Lavinia dabbed away her own tears. "Thanks, Apollo."

As if I'd done her a favor. Why, then, did I feel like I'd just kicked each and every one of these nature spirits right in the taproots? I'd spent a lot of time worrying about the fate of New Rome and Camp Jupiter, the Oracles, my friends, and myself. But these hackberries and crabgrasses deserved to live just as much. They, too, were facing death. They were terrified. If the emperors launched their weapons, they stood no chance. The homeless mortals with their shopping carts in People's Park would also burn, right along with the legionnaires. Their lives were worth no less.

The mortals might not understand the disaster. They'd attribute it to runaway wildfires or whatever other causes their brains could comprehend. But I would know the truth. If this vast, weird, beautiful expanse of the California coast burned, it would be because I had failed to stop my enemies.

"Okay, guys," Lavinia continued, after taking a moment to compose herself. "You heard him. The emperors will be here by tomorrow evening."

"But that gives us no time," said a redwood dryad. "If they do to the Bay Area what they did to LA…"

I could feel the fear ripple through the crowd like a cold wind.

“The legion will fight them, though, right?” a faun asked nervously. “I mean, they might win.”

“C’mon, Reginald,” a dryad chided. “You want to depend on mortals to protect us? When has *that* ever worked out?”

The others muttered assent.

“To be fair,” Lavinia cut in, “Frank and Reyna are trying. They’re sending a small team of commandos out to intercept the ships. Michael Kahale, and few other hand-picked demigods. But I’m not optimistic.”

“I hadn’t heard anything about that,” I said. “How did you find out?”

She raised her pink eyebrows like, *Please.* “And of course Lester here will try to summon godly help with some supersecret ritual, but…”

She didn’t need to say the rest. She wasn’t optimistic about that, either.

“So what will you do?” I asked. “What *can* you do?”

I didn’t mean to sound critical. I just couldn’t imagine any options.

The fauns’ panicky expressions seemed to hint at their game plan: get bus tickets to Portland, Oregon, immediately. But that wouldn’t help the dryads. They were literally rooted to their native soil. Perhaps they could go into deep hibernation, the way the dryads in the south had. But would that be enough to enable them to weather a firestorm? I’d heard stories about certain species of plants that germinated and thrived after devastating fires swept across the landscape, but I doubted most had that ability.

Honestly, I didn’t know much about dryad life cycles, or how they protected themselves from climate disasters. Perhaps if I’d spent more time over the centuries talking to them and less time chasing them…

Wow. I *really* didn’t even know myself anymore.

“We have a lot to discuss,” said one of the dryads.

“Peaches,” agreed Peaches. He looked at me with a clear message: *Go away now.*

I had so many questions for him: Why had he been absent so long? Why was he here and not with Meg?

I suspected I wouldn’t get any answers tonight. At least nothing beyond snarls, bites, and the word *peaches*. I thought about what the dryad had said about not trusting mortals to solve nature-spirit problems. Apparently, that included me. I had delivered my message. Now I was dismissed.

My heart was already heavy, and Meg’s state of mind was so fragile…. I didn’t know how I could break the news to her that her diapered little peach demon had become a rogue fruit.

“Let’s get you back to camp,” Lavinia said to me. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

We left Don behind with the other nature spirits, all deep in crisis-mode conversation, and retraced our steps down Telegraph Avenue.

After a few blocks, I got up the courage to ask, “What will they do?”

Lavinia stirred as if she’d forgotten I was there. “You mean what will *we* do. ’Cause I’m with them.”

A lump formed in my throat. “Lavinia, you’re scaring me. What are you planning?”

“I tried to leave it alone,” she muttered. In the glow of the streetlamps, the wisps of pink hair that had escaped her cap seemed to float around her head like cotton candy. “After what we saw in the tomb—Bobby and the others, after you described what we’re facing tomorrow—”

“Lavinia, please—”

“I can’t fall into line like a good soldier. Me locking shields and marching off to die with everybody else? That’s not going to help anybody.”

“But—”

“It’s best you don’t ask.” Her growl was almost as intimidating as Peaches’s. “And it’s *definitely* best that you not say anything to anybody about tonight. Now, c’mon.”

The rest of the way back, she ignored my questions. She seemed to have a dark bubble-gum-scented cloud hanging over her head. She got me safely past the sentries, under the wall, and back to the coffee shop before she slipped away into the dark without even a good-bye.

Perhaps I should have stopped her. Raised the alarm. Gotten her arrested. But what good would that have done? It seemed to me Lavinia had never been comfortable in the legion. After all, she spent much of her time looking for secret exits and hidden trails out of the valley. Now she’d finally snapped.

I had a sinking feeling that I would never see her again. She’d be on the next bus to Portland with a few dozen fauns, and as much as I wanted to be angry about that, I could only feel sad. In her place, would I have done any differently?

When I got back to our guest room, Meg was passed out, snoring, her glasses dangling from her fingers, bedsheets wadded around her feet. I tucked her in as best I could. If she was having any bad dreams about her peach spirit friend plotting with the local dryads only a few miles away, I

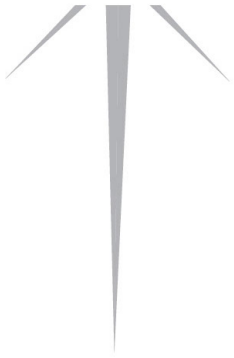
couldn’t tell. Tomorrow I’d have to decide what to say to her. Tonight, I’d let her sleep.

I crawled into my own cot, sure that I’d be tossing and turning until morning.

Instead, I passed out immediately.

When I woke, the early morning sunlight was in my face. Meg’s cot was empty. I realized I’d slept like the dead—no dreams, no visions. That did not comfort me. When the nightmares go silent, that usually means something else is coming—something even worse.

I dressed and gathered my supplies, trying not to think about how tired I was, or how much my gut hurt. Then I grabbed a muffin and a coffee from Bombilo and went out to find my friends. Today, one way or another, the fate of New Rome would be decided.



23

In my pickup truck
With my dogs and my weapons
And this fool, Lester

REYNA AND MEG WERE waiting for me at the camp's front gates, though I barely recognized the former. In place of her praetor's regalia, she wore blue running shoes and skinny jeans, a long-sleeved copper tee, and a maroon sweater wrap. With her hair pulled back in a braided whip and her face lightly brushed with makeup, she could've passed for one of the many thousands of Bay Area college students that nobody would think twice about. I supposed that was the point.

"What?" she asked me.

I realized I'd been staring. "Nothing."

Meg snorted. She was dressed in her usual green dress, yellow leggings, and red high-tops, so she could blend in with the many thousands of Bay Area first graders—except for her twelve-year-old's height, her gardening belt, and the pink button pinned to her collar that displayed a stylized unicorn's head with crossed bones underneath. I wondered if she'd bought it in a New Rome gift shop or somehow gotten it specially made. Either possibility was unsettling.

Reyna spread her hands. "I *do* have civilian clothes, Apollo. Even with the Mist helping to obscure things, walking through San Francisco in full legionnaire armor can attract some funny looks."

"No. Yeah. You look great. I mean good." Why were my palms sweating? "I mean, can we go now?"

Reyna put two fingers in her mouth and let loose a taxi-cab whistle so shrill it cleared out my eustachian tubes. From inside the fort, her two metal greyhounds came running, barking like small-weapons fire.

"Oh, good," I said, trying to suppress my panic-and-run instinct. "Your dogs are coming."

Reyna smirked. "Well, they'd get upset if I drove to San Francisco without them."

"Drove?" I was about to say *In what?* when I heard a honk from the direction of the city. A battered bright red Chevy four-by-four rumbled down a road usually reserved for marching legionnaires and elephants.

At the wheel was Hazel Levesque, with Frank Zhang riding shotgun.

They pulled up next to us. The vehicle had barely stopped moving when Aurum and Argentum leaped into the bed of the truck, their metal tongues lolling and tails wagging.

Hazel climbed out of the cab. "All gassed up, Praetor."

"Thank you, Centurion." Reyna smiled. "How are the driving lessons coming along?"

"Good! I didn't even run into Terminus this time."

"Progress," Reyna agreed.

Frank came around from the passenger's side. "Yep, Hazel will be ready for public roads in no time."

I had many things to ask: Where did they keep this truck? Was there a gas station in New Rome? Why had I been hiking so much if it was possible to drive?

Meg beat me to the real question: "Do I get to ride in back with the dogs?"

"No, ma'am," said Reyna. "You'll sit in the cab with your seat belt on."

"Aw." Meg ran off to pet the dogs.

Frank gave Reyna a bear hug (without turning into a bear). "Be careful out there, all right?"

Reyna didn't seem to know what to do with this show of affection. Her arms went stiff. Then she awkwardly patted her fellow praetor on the back.

"You too," she said. "Any word on the strike force?"

"They left before dawn," Frank said. "Kahale felt good about it, but…" He shrugged, as if to say their anti-yacht commando mission was now in the hands of the gods. Which, as a former god, I can tell you was *not* reassuring.

Reyna turned to Hazel. "And the zombie pickets?"

“Ready,” Hazel said. “If Tarquin’s hordes come from the same direction as before, they’re in for some nasty surprises. I also set traps along the other approaches to the city. Hopefully we can stop them before they’re in hand-to-hand range so…”

She hesitated, apparently unwilling to finish her sentence. I thought I understood. *So we don’t have to see their faces.* If the legion *had* to confront a wave of undead comrades, it would be much better to destroy them at a distance, without the anguish of having to recognize former friends.

“I just wish…” Hazel shook her head. “Well, I still worry Tarquin has something else planned. I should be able to figure it out, but…” She tapped her forehead as if she wanted to reset her brain. I could sympathize.

“You’ve done plenty,” Frank assured her. “If they throw surprises at us, we’ll adapt.”

Reyna nodded. “Okay, then, we’re off. Don’t forget to stock the catapults.”

“Of course,” Frank said.

“And double-check with the quartermaster about those flaming barricades.”

“Of course.”

“And—” Reyna stopped herself. “You know what you’re doing. Sorry.”

Frank grinned. “Just bring us whatever we need to summon that godly help. We’ll keep the camp in one piece until you get back.”

Hazel studied Reyna’s outfit with concern. “Your sword’s in the truck. Don’t you want to take a shield or something?”

“Nah. I’ve got my cloak. It’ll turn aside most weapons.” Reyna brushed the collar of her sweater wrap. Instantly it unfurled into her usual purple cape.

Frank’s smile faded. “Does *my* cloak do that?”

“See you, guys!” Reyna climbed behind the wheel.

“Wait, does *my* cloak deflect weapons?” Frank called after us. “Does mine turn into a sweater wrap?”

As we pulled away, I could see Frank Zhang in the rearview mirror, intently studying the stitching of his cape.

Our first challenge of the morning: merging onto the Bay Bridge.

Getting out of Camp Jupiter had been no problem. A well-hidden dirt road led from the valley up into the hills, eventually depositing us on the

residential streets of East Oakland. From there we took Highway 24 until it merged with Interstate 580. Then the real fun began.

The morning commuters had apparently not gotten word that we were on a vital mission to save the greater metropolitan area. They stubbornly refused to get out of our way. Perhaps we should have taken public transportation, but I doubted they let killer dog automatons ride the BART trains.

Reyna tapped her fingers on the wheel, mumbling along to Tego Calderón lyrics on the truck's ancient CD player. I enjoyed reggaeton as much as the next Greek god, but it was perhaps not the music I would've chosen to soothe my nerves on the morning of a quest. I found it a bit too peppy for my pre-combat jitters.

Sitting between us, Meg rummaged through the seeds in her gardener's belt. During our battle in the tomb, she'd told us, lots of packages had opened and gotten mixed up. Now she was trying to figure out which seeds were which. This meant she would occasionally hold up a seed and stare at it until it burst into its mature form—dandelion, tomato, eggplant, sunflower. Soon the cab smelled like the gardening section at Home Depot.

I had not told Meg about seeing Peaches. I wasn't even sure how to start the conversation. *Hey, did you know your karpos is holding clandestine meetings with the fauns and crabgrasses in People's Park?*

The longer I waited to say something, the harder it became. I told myself it wasn't a good idea to distract Meg during an important quest. I wanted to honor Lavinia's wishes that I not blab. True, I hadn't seen Lavinia that morning before we left, but maybe her plans weren't as nefarious as I thought. Maybe she wasn't actually halfway to Oregon by now.

In reality, I didn't speak because I was a coward. I was afraid to enrage the two dangerous young women I rode with, one of whom could have me ripped apart by a pair of metal greyhounds, while the other could cause cabbages to grow out of my nose.

We inched our way across the bridge, Reyna finger-tapping to the beat of "El Que Sabe, Sabe." *He who knows, knows.* I was 75 percent sure there was no hidden message in Reyna's choice of songs.

"When we get there," she said, "we'll have to park at the base of the hill and hike up. The area around Sutro Tower is restricted."

"You've decided the tower itself is our target," I said, "not Mount Sutro behind it?"

“Can’t be sure, obviously. But I double-checked Thalia’s list of trouble spots. The tower was on there.”

I waited for her to elaborate. “Thalia’s *what*?”

Reyna blinked. “Didn’t I tell you about that? So, Thalia and the Hunters of Artemis, you know, they keep a running list of places where they’ve seen unusual monstrous activity, stuff they can’t quite explain. Sutro Tower is one of them. Thalia sent me her list of locations for the Bay Area so Camp Jupiter can keep an eye on them.”

“How many trouble spots?” Meg asked. “Can we visit all of them?”

Reyna nudged her playfully. “I like your spirit, Killer, but there are dozens in San Francisco alone. We—I mean the legion—we try to keep an eye on them all, but it’s a lot. Especially recently…”

With the battles, I thought. *And the deaths.*

I wondered about the small hesitation in Reyna’s voice when she said *we* and then clarified that she meant *the legion*. I wondered what other *we*’s Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano felt part of. Certainly I had never imagined her in civilian clothes, driving a battered pickup truck, taking her metal greyhounds for a hike. And she’d been in touch with Thalia Grace, my sister’s lieutenant, leader of the Hunters of Artemis.

I hated the way that made me feel jealous.

“How do you know Thalia?” I tried to sound nonchalant. Judging from Meg’s cross-eyed look, I failed miserably.

Reyna didn’t seem to notice. She changed lanes, trying to make headway through the traffic. In the back, Aurum and Argentum barked with joy, thrilling in the adventure.

“Thalia and I fought Orion together in Puerto Rico,” she said. “The Amazons and Hunters both lost a lot of good women. That sort of thing… shared experience…Anyway, yeah, we’ve kept in touch.”

“How? The communication lines are all down.”

“Letters,” she said.

“Letters…” I seemed to remember those, back from around the days of vellum and wax seals. “You mean when you write something by hand on paper, put it in an envelope, stick a stamp on it—”

“And mail it. Right. I mean, it can be weeks or months between letters, but Thalia’s a good pen pal.”

I tried to fathom that. Many descriptions came to mind when I thought about Thalia Grace. *Pen pal* was not one of them.

“Where do you even mail the letters *to*?” I asked. “The Hunters are constantly on the move.”

“They have a PO box in Wyoming and—Why are we talking about this?”

Meg pinched a seed between her fingers. A geranium exploded into bloom. “Is that where your dogs went? Searching for Thalia?”

I didn’t see how she’d made that connection, but Reyna nodded.

“Just after you arrived,” Reyna said, “I wrote Thalia about…you know, Jason. I knew it was a long shot that she’d get the message in time, so I sent Aurum and Argentum out looking for her, too, in case the Hunters were in the area. No luck.”

I imagined what could happen if Thalia received Reyna’s letter. Would she come charging into Camp Jupiter at the head of the Hunters, ready to help us fight the emperors and Tarquin’s undead hordes? Or would she turn her wrath on me? Thalia had already bailed me out of trouble once, in Indianapolis. By way of thanks, I’d gotten her brother killed in Santa Barbara. I doubted anyone would object if a stray Hunter’s arrow found me as its target during the fighting. I shivered, thankful for the slowness of the US Postal Service.

We made our way past Treasure Island, the anchor of the Bay Bridge midway between Oakland and San Francisco. I thought about Caligula’s fleet, which would be passing this island later tonight, ready to unload its troops, and if necessary, its arsenal of Greek fire bombs on the unsuspecting East Bay. I cursed the slowness of the US Postal Service.

“So,” I said, making a second attempt at nonchalance, “are you and Thalia, er…?”

Reyna raised an eyebrow. “Involved *romantically*?”

“Well, I just…I mean…Um…”

Oh, very smooth, Apollo. Have I mentioned I was once the god of poetry?

Reyna rolled her eyes. “If I had a denarius for every time I got that question…Aside from the fact that Thalia is in the Hunters, and thus sworn to celibacy…Why does a strong friendship always have to progress to romance? Thalia’s an excellent friend. Why would I risk messing that up?”

“Uh—”

“That was a rhetorical question,” Reyna added. “I do not need a response.”

“I know what *rhetorical* means.” I made a mental note to double-check the word’s definition with Socrates the next time I was in Greece. Then I remembered Socrates was dead. “I only thought—”

“I love this song,” Meg interrupted. “Turn it up!”

I doubted Meg had the slightest interest in Tego Calderón, but her intervention may have saved my life. Reyna cranked up the volume, thus ending my attempt at death by casual conversation.

We stayed silent the rest of the way into the city, listening to Tego Calderón singing “Punto y Aparte” and Reyna’s greyhounds jubilantly barking like semiauto clips discharged on New Year’s Eve.

24

Stick my godly face
Where it doesn't belong and—
Venus, I hate you

FOR SUCH A POPULATED area, San Francisco had a surprising number of wilderness pockets. We parked on a dead-end road at the base of the tower's hill. To our right, a field of rocks and weeds offered a multimillion-dollar view of the city. To our left, the incline was so heavily forested you could almost use the eucalyptus trunks as climbing rungs.

From the hill's summit, perhaps a quarter mile above us, Sutro Tower soared into the fog, its red-and-white pylons and crossbeams forming a giant tripod that reminded me uncomfortably of the Delphic Oracle's seat. Or the scaffolding for a funeral pyre.

"There's a relay station at the base." Reyna pointed toward the hilltop. "We may have to deal with mortal guards, fences, barbed wire, that kind of thing. Plus whatever Tarquin might have waiting for us."

"Neat," Meg said. "Let's go!"

The greyhounds needed no encouragement. They charged uphill, plowing through the underbrush. Meg followed, clearly determined to rip her clothes on as many brambles and thorn bushes as possible.

Reyna must have noticed my pained expression as I contemplated the climb.

"Don't worry," she said. "We can take it slow. Aurum and Argentum know to wait for me at the top."

“But does Meg?” I imagined my young friend charging alone into a relay station filled with guards, zombies, and other “neat” surprises.

“Good point,” Reyna said. “Let’s take it medium, then.”

I did my best, which entailed lots of wheezing, sweating, and leaning against trees to rest. My archery skills may have improved. My music was getting better. But my stamina was still 100 percent Lester.

At least Reyna didn’t ask me how my wound felt. The answer was *Somewhere south of horrible*.

When I’d gotten dressed that morning, I had avoided looking at my gut, but I couldn’t ignore the throbbing pain, or the deep purple tendrils of infection now licking at the bases of my wrists and my neck, which not even my long-sleeve hoodie could hide. Occasionally, my vision blurred, turning the world a sickly shade of eggplant. I would hear a distant whisper in my head…the voice of Tarquin, beckoning me to return to his tomb. So far, the voice was just an annoyance, but I had the feeling it would get stronger until I could no longer ignore it…or fail to obey it.

I told myself I just needed to hang in there until tonight. Then I could summon godly help and get myself cured. Or I’d die in battle. At this point, either option was preferable to a painful, lingering slide into undeath.

Reyna hiked alongside me, using her sheathed sword to poke the ground as if she expected to find land mines. Ahead of us, through the dense foliage, I saw no sign of Meg or the greyhounds, but I could hear them rustling through leaves and stepping on twigs. If any sentries waited for us at the summit, we would not be taking them by surprise.

“So,” Reyna said, apparently satisfied that Meg was out of earshot, “are you going to tell me?”

My pulse accelerated to a tempo suitable for a parade march. “Tell you what?”

She raised her eyebrows like, *Really?* “Ever since you showed up at camp, you’ve been acting jumpy. You stare at me like *I’m* the one who got infected. Then you won’t make eye contact. You stammer. You fidget. I do notice these things.”

“Ah.”

I climbed a few more steps. Perhaps if I concentrated on the hike, Reyna would let the matter drop.

“Look,” she said, “I’m not going to bite you. Whatever is going on, I’d rather not have it hanging over your head, or mine, when we go into battle.”

I swallowed, wishing I had some of Lavinia's bubble gum to cut the taste of poison and fear.

Reyna made a good point. Whether I died today, or turned into a zombie, or somehow managed to live, I would rather face my fate with my conscience clear and no secrets. For one thing, I should tell Meg about my encounter with Peaches. I should also tell her I didn't hate her. In fact, I liked her pretty well. All right, I loved her. She was the bratty little sister I'd never had.

As for Reyna—I didn't know whether I was or wasn't the answer to her destiny. Venus might curse me for leveling with the praetor, but I had to tell Reyna what was bothering me. I was unlikely to get another chance.

"It's about Venus," I said.

Reyna's expression hardened. It was her turn to stare at the hillside and hope the conversation went away. "I see."

"She told me—"

"Her little prediction." Reyna spat out the words like inedible seeds. "No mortal or demigod will ever heal my heart."

"I didn't mean to pry," I promised. "It's just—"

"Oh, I believe you. Venus loves her gossip. I doubt there's anyone at Camp Jupiter who doesn't know what she told in me Charleston."

"I—Really?"

Reyna broke a dry branch off a shrub and flicked it into the underbrush. "I went on that quest with Jason, what, two years ago? Venus took one look at me and decided…I don't know. I was broken. I needed romantic healing. Whatever. I wasn't back at camp a full day before the whispering started. Nobody would admit that they knew, but they knew. The looks I got: *Oh, poor Reyna.* The innocent suggestions about who I should date."

She didn't sound angry. It was more like weighed down and weary. I remembered Frank Zhang's concern about how long Reyna had shouldered the burdens of leadership, how he wished he could do more to relieve her. Apparently, a lot of legionnaires wanted to help Reyna. Not all of that help had been welcome or useful.

"The thing is," she continued, "I'm *not* broken."

"Of course not."

"So why have you been acting nervous? What does Venus have to do with it? Please don't tell me it's pity."

"N-no. Nothing like that."

Up ahead, I heard Meg romping through the brush. Occasionally she would say, “Hey, how’s it going?” in a conversational tone, as if passing an acquaintance on the street. I supposed she was talking to the local dryads. Either that or the theoretical guards we were looking out for were very bad at their jobs.

“You see…” I fumbled for words. “Back when I was a god, Venus gave me a warning. About you.”

Aurum and Argentum burst through the bushes to check on Mom, their toothy smiles gleaming like freshly polished bear traps. Oh, good. I had an audience.

Reyna patted Aurum absently on the head. “Go on, Lester.”

“Um…” The marching band in my bloodstream was now doing double-time maneuvers. “Well, I walked into the throne room one day, and Venus was studying this hologram of you, and I asked—just completely casually, mind you—‘Who’s that?’ And she told me your…your fate, I guess. The thing about healing your heart. Then she just…tore into me. She forbade me to approach you. She said if I ever tried to woo you, she would curse me forever. It was totally unnecessary. And also embarrassing.”

Reyna’s expression remained as smooth and hard as marble. “*Woo?* Is that even a thing anymore? Do people still *woo*?”

“I—I don’t know. But I stayed away from you. You’ll notice I stayed away. Not that I would’ve done otherwise without the warning. I didn’t even know who you were.”

She stepped over a fallen log and offered me a hand, which I declined. I didn’t like the way her greyhounds were grinning at me.

“So, in other words,” she said, “what? You’re worried Venus will strike you dead because you’re invading my personal space? I really wouldn’t worry about that, Lester. You’re not a god anymore. You’re obviously not trying to woo me. We’re comrades on a quest.”

She had to hit me where it hurt—right in the truth.

“Yes,” I said. “But I was thinking….”

Why was this so hard? I had spoken of love to women before. And men. And gods. And nymphs. And the occasional attractive statue before I realized it was a statue. Why, then, were the veins in my neck threatening to explode?

“I thought if—if it would help,” I continued, “perhaps it was destiny that…Well, you see, I’m not a god anymore, as you said. And Venus was

quite specific that I shouldn't stick my *godly face* anywhere near you. But Venus…I mean, her plans are always twisting and turning. She may have been practicing reverse psychology, so to speak. If we were meant to…Um, I could help you."

Reyna stopped. Her dogs tilted their metal heads toward her, perhaps trying to gauge their master's mood. Then they regarded me, their jeweled eyes cold and accusatory.

"Lester." Reyna sighed. "What in Tartarus are you saying? I'm not in the mood for riddles."

"That maybe I'm the answer," I blurted. "To healing your heart. I could…you know, be your boyfriend. As Lester. If you wanted. You and me. You know, like…yeah."

I was absolutely certain that up on Mount Olympus, the other Olympians all had their phones out and were filming me to post on Euterpe-Tube.

Reyna stared at me long enough for the marching band in my circulatory system to play a complete stanza of "You're a Grand Old Flag." Her eyes were dark and dangerous. Her expression was unreadable, like the outer surface of an explosive device.

She was going to murder me.

No. She would order her *dogs* to murder me. By the time Meg rushed to my aid, it would be too late. Or worse—Meg would help Reyna bury my remains, and no one would be the wiser.

When they returned to camp, the Romans would ask *What happened to Apollo?*

Who? Reyna would say. *Oh, that guy? Dunno, we lost him.*

Oh, well! the Romans would reply, and that would be that.

Reyna's mouth tightened into a grimace. She bent over, gripping her knees. Her body began to shake. Oh, gods, what had I done?

Perhaps I should comfort her, hold her in my arms. Perhaps I should run for my life. Why was I so bad at romance?

Reyna made a squeaking sound, then a sort of sustained whimper. I really *had* hurt her!

Then she straightened, tears streaming down her face, and burst into laughter. The sound reminded me of water rushing over a creek bed that had been dry for ages. Once she started, she couldn't seem to stop. She doubled over, stood upright again, leaned against a tree, and looked at her dogs as if to share the joke.

“Oh…my…gods,” she wheezed. She managed to restrain her mirth long enough to blink at me through the tears, as if to make sure I was really there and she’d heard me correctly. “You. Me? HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA.”

Aurum and Argentum seemed just as confused as I was. They glanced at each other, then at me, as if to say, *What have you done to our mom? If you broke her, we will kill you.*

Reyna’s laughter rolled across the hillside.

Once I got over my initial shock, my ears began to burn. Over the last few months, I had experienced quite a few humiliations. But being laughed at…to my face…when I wasn’t trying to be funny…that was a new low.

“I don’t see why—”

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!”

“I wasn’t saying that—”

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! Stop, please. You’re killing me.”

“She doesn’t mean that literally!” I yelped for the dogs’ benefit.

“And you thought…” Reyna didn’t seem to know where to point—at me, herself, the sky. “Seriously? Wait. My dogs would have attacked if you were lying. Oh. Wow. HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!”

“So that’s a *no*, then,” I huffed. “Fine. I get it. You can stop—”

Her laughter turned to asthmatic squeaking as she wiped her eyes. “Apollo. When you were a god…” She struggled for breath. “Like, with your powers and good looks and whatever—”

“Say no more. Naturally, you would have—”

“That would have been a solid, absolute, hard-pass *NO*.”

I gaped. “I am *astonished*!”

“And as Lester…I mean, you’re sweet and kind of adorkable at times.”

“Adorkable? At *times*?”

“But wow. Still a big-time NO. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

A lesser mortal would have crumbled to dust on the spot, their self-esteem imploding.

In that moment, as she rejected me utterly, Reyna had never seemed more beautiful and desirable. Funny how that works.

Meg emerged from the hackberry bushes. “Guys, there’s nobody up there, but—” She froze, taking in the scene, then glanced at the greyhounds for explanation.

Don’t ask us, their metal faces seemed to say. *Mom is never like this.*

“What’s so funny?” Meg asked. A smile tugged at her mouth, as if she wanted to join in the joke. Which was, of course, me.

“Nothing.” Reyna held her breath for a moment, then lost it again in a fit of giggles. Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano, daughter of Bellona, feared praetor of the Twelfth Legion, giggling.

At last she seemed to regain some of her self-control. Her eyes danced with humor. Her cheeks glowed beet-red. Her smile made her seem like a different person—a *happy* different person.

“Thanks, Lester,” she said. “I needed that. Now let’s go find the soundless god, shall we?”

She led the way up the hill, holding her ribs as if her chest still hurt from too much hilarity.

Then and there, I decided that if I ever became a god again, I would rearrange the order of my vengeance list. Venus had just moved up to the top spot.

25

Frozen in terror
Like a god in the headlights
Why U speeding up?

MORTAL SECURITY WAS NOT a problem.

There wasn't any.

Across a flat expanse of rocks and weeds, the relay station sat nestled at the base of Sutro Tower. The blocky brown building had clusters of white satellite dishes dotting its roof like toadstools after a rain shower. The door stood wide open. The windows were dark. The parking area out front was empty.

"This isn't right," Reyna murmured. "Didn't Tarquin say they were doubling security?"

"Doubling *the flock*," Meg corrected. "But I don't see any sheep or anything."

That idea made me shudder. Over the millennia, I'd seen quite a few flocks of guardian sheep. They tended to be poisonous and/or carnivorous, and they smelled like mildewed sweaters.

"Apollo, any thoughts?" Reyna asked.

At least she could look at me now without bursting into laughter, but I didn't trust myself to speak. I just shook my head helplessly. I was good at that.

"Maybe we're in the wrong place?" Meg asked.

Reyna bit her lower lip. "Something's definitely *off* here. Let me check inside the station. Aurum and Argentum can make a quick search. If we

encounter any mortals, I'll just say I was hiking and got lost. You guys wait here. Guard my exit. If you hear barking, that means trouble."

She jogged across the field, Aurum and Argentum at her heels, and disappeared inside the building.

Meg peered at me over the top of her cat-eye glasses. "How come you made her laugh?"

"That wasn't my intention. Besides, it isn't illegal to make someone laugh."

"You asked her to be your girlfriend, didn't you?"

"I—What? No. Sort of. Yes."

"That was stupid."

I found it humiliating to have my love life criticized by a little girl wearing a unicorn-and-crossbones button. "You wouldn't understand."

Meg snorted.

I seemed to be everyone's source of amusement today.

I studied the tower that loomed above us. Up the side of the nearest support column, a steel-ribbed chute enclosed a row of rungs, forming a tunnel that one could climb through—if one were crazy enough—to reach the first set of crossbeams, which bristled with more satellite dishes and cellular-antenna fungi. From there, the rungs continued upward into a low-lying blanket of fog that swallowed the tower's top half. In the white mist, a hazy black V floated in and out of sight—a bird of some sort.

I shivered, thinking of the *strixes* that had attacked us in the Burning Maze, but strixes only hunted at nighttime. That dark shape had to be something else, maybe a hawk looking for mice. The law of averages dictated that once in a while I'd have to come across a creature that didn't want to kill me, right?

Nevertheless, the fleeting shape filled me with dread. It reminded me of the many near-death experiences I'd shared with Meg McCaffrey, and of the promise I'd made to myself to be honest with her, back in the good old days of ten minutes ago, before Reyna had nuked my self-esteem.

"Meg," I said. "Last night—"

"You saw Peaches. I know."

She might have been talking about the weather. Her gaze stayed fixed on the doorway of the relay station.

"You know," I repeated.

"He's been around for a couple of days."

“You’ve seen him?”

“Just sensed him. He’s got his reasons for staying away. Doesn’t like the Romans. He’s working on a plan to help the local nature spirits.”

“And…if that plan is to help them run away?”

In the diffused gray light of the fog bank, Meg’s glasses looked like her own tiny satellite dishes. “You think that’s what he wants? Or what the nature spirits want?”

I remembered the fauns’ fearful expressions at People’s Park, the dryads’ weary anger. “I don’t know. But Lavinia—”

“Yeah. She’s with them.” Meg shrugged one shoulder. “The centurions noticed her missing at morning roll call. They’re trying to downplay it. Bad for morale.”

I stared at my young companion, who had apparently been taking lessons from Lavinia in Advanced Camp Gossip. “Does Reyna know?”

“That Lavinia is gone? Sure. Where Lavinia went? Nah. I don’t either, really. Whatever she and Peaches and the rest are planning, there’s not much we can do about it now. We’ve got other stuff to worry about.”

I crossed my arms. “Well, I’m glad we had this talk, so I could unburden myself of all the things you already knew. I was also going to say that you’re important to me and I might even love you like a sister, but—”

“I already know that, too.” She gave me a crooked grin, offering proof that Nero really should have taken her to the orthodontist when she was younger. “ ’S’okay. You’ve gotten less annoying, too.”

“Hmph.”

“Look, here comes Reyna.”

And so ended our warm family moment, as the praetor reemerged from the station, her expression unsettled, her greyhounds happily circling her legs as if waiting for jelly beans.

“The place is empty,” Reyna announced. “Looks like everybody left in a hurry. I’d say something cleared them out—like a bomb threat, maybe.”

I frowned. “In that case, wouldn’t there be emergency vehicles here?”

“The Mist,” Meg guessed. “Could’ve made the mortals see anything to get them out of here. Clearing the scene before…”

I was about to ask *Before what?* But I didn’t want the answer.

Meg was right, of course. The Mist was a strange force. Sometimes it manipulated mortal minds after a supernatural event, like damage control. Other times, it operated in advance of a catastrophe, pushing away mortals

who might otherwise wind up as collateral damage—like ripples in a local pond warning of a dragon's first footstep.

"Well," Reyna said, "if that's true, it means we're in the right place. And I can only think of one other direction to explore." Her eyes followed the pylons of Sutro Tower until they disappeared into the fog. "Who wants to climb first?"

Want had nothing to do with it. I was drafted.

The ostensible reason was so Reyna could steady me if I started feeling shaky on the ladder. The real reason was probably so I couldn't back out if I got scared. Meg went last, I suppose because that would give her time to select the proper gardening seeds to throw at our enemies while they were mauling my face and Reyna was pushing me forward.

Aurum and Argentum, not being able to climb, stayed on the ground to guard our exit like the opposable-thumb-lacking slackers they were. If we ended up plummeting to our deaths, the dogs would be right there to bark excitedly at our corpses. That gave me great comfort.

The rungs were slippery and cold. The chute's metal ribs made me feel like I was crawling through a giant Slinky. I imagined they were meant as some kind of safety feature, but they did nothing to reassure me. If I slipped, they would just be more painful things for me to hit on my way down.

After a few minutes, my limbs were shaking. My fingers trembled. The first set of crossbeams seemed to be getting no closer. I looked down and saw we had barely cleared the radar dishes on the station's rooftop.

The cold wind buffeted me around the cage, ripping through my hoodie, rattling the arrows in my quiver. Whatever Tarquin's guards were, if they caught me on this ladder, my bow and my ukulele would do me no good. At least a flock of killer sheep couldn't climb ladders.

Meanwhile, in the fog high above us, more dark shapes swirled—definitely birds of some kind. I reminded myself that they couldn't be strixes. Still, a queasy sense of danger gnawed at my stomach.

What if—?

Stop it, Apollo, I chided myself. *There's nothing you can do now but keep climbing.*

I concentrated on one perilous slippery rung at a time. The soles of my shoes squeaked against the metal.

Below me, Meg asked, "Do you guys smell roses?"

I wondered if she was trying to make me laugh. “Roses? Why in the name of the twelve gods would I smell *roses* up here?”

Reyna said, “All I smell is Lester’s shoes. I think he stepped in something.”

“A large puddle of shame,” I muttered.

“I smell roses,” Meg insisted. “Whatever. Keep moving.”

I did, since I had no choice.

At last, we reached the first set of crossbeams. A catwalk ran the length of the girders, allowing us to stand and rest for a few minutes. We were only about sixty feet above the relay station, but it felt much higher. Below us spread an endless grid of city blocks, rumpling and twisting across the hills whenever necessary, the streets making designs that reminded me of the Thai alphabet. (The goddess Nang Kwak had tried to teach me their language once, over a lovely dinner of spicy noodles, but I was hopeless at it.)

Down in the parking lot, Aurum and Argentum looked up at us and wagged their tails. They seemed to be waiting for us to do something. The mean-spirited part of me wanted to shoot an arrow to the top of the next hill and yell, *FETCH!* but I doubted Reyna would appreciate that.

“It’s fun up here,” Meg decided. She did a cartwheel, because she enjoyed giving me heart palpitations.

I scanned the triangle of catwalks, hoping to see something besides cables, circuit boxes, and satellite equipment—preferably something labeled: PUSH THIS BUTTON TO COMPLETE QUEST AND COLLECT REWARD.

Of course not, I grumbled to myself. *Tarquin wouldn’t be so kind as to put whatever we needed on the lowest level.*

“Definitely no silent gods here,” Reyna said.

“Thanks a lot.”

She smiled, clearly still in a good mood from my earlier misstep into the puddle of shame. “I also don’t see any doors. Didn’t the prophecy say I’m supposed to open a door?”

“Could be a metaphorical one,” I speculated. “But you’re right, there’s nothing here for us.”

Meg pointed to the next level of crossbeams—another sixty feet up, barely visible in the belly of the fog bank. “The smell of roses is stronger from up there,” she said. “We should keep climbing.”

I sniffed the air. I smelled only the faint scent of eucalyptus from the woods below us, my own sweat cooling against my skin, and the sour whiff

of antiseptic and infection rising from my bandaged abdomen.

"Hooray," I said. "More climbing."

This time, Reyna took the lead. There was no climbing cage going to the second level—just bare metal rungs against the side of the girder, as if the builders had decided *Welp, if you made it this far, you must be crazy, so no more safety features!* Now that the metal-ribbed chute was gone, I realized it *had* given me some psychological comfort. At least I could pretend I was inside a safe structure, not free-climbing a giant tower like a lunatic.

It made no sense to me why Tarquin would put something as important as his silent god at the top of a radio tower, or why he had allied himself with the emperors in the first place, or why the smell of roses might signal that we were getting closer to our goal, or why those dark birds kept circling above us in the fog. Weren't they cold? Didn't they have jobs?

Still, I had no doubt we were meant to climb this monstrous tripod. It felt right, by which I mean it felt terrifying and wrong. I had a premonition that everything *would* make sense to me soon enough, and when it did, I wouldn't like it.

It was as if I were standing in the dark, staring at small disconnected lights in the distance, wondering what they might be. By the time I realized *Oh, hey, those are the headlights of a large truck barreling toward me!* it would be too late.

We were halfway to the second set of crossbeams when an angry shadow dove out of the fog, plummeting past my shoulder. The gust from its wings nearly knocked me off the ladder.

"Whoa!" Meg grabbed my left ankle, though that did nothing to steady me. "What was that?"

I caught a glimpse of the bird as it disappeared back into the fog: oily black wings, black beak, black eyes.

A sob built in my throat, as one of the proverbial truck's headlights became very clear to me. "A raven."

"A *raven*?" Reyna frowned down at me. "That thing was *huge*!"

True, the creature that buzzed me must've had a wingspan of at least twenty feet, but then several angry croaks sounded from somewhere in the mist, leaving me in no doubt.

"Ravens, plural," I corrected. "*Giant* ravens."

Half a dozen spiraled into view, their hungry black eyes dancing over us like targeting lasers, assessing our soft-and-tasty weak spots.

“A flock of ravens.” Meg sounded half-incredulous, half-fascinated. “Those are the guards? They’re pretty.”

I groaned, wishing I could be anywhere else—like in bed, under a thick layer of warm Kevlar quilts. I was tempted to protest that a group of ravens was actually called an *unkindness* or a *conspiracy*. I wanted to shout that Tarquin’s guards should be disqualified on that technicality. But I doubted Tarquin cared about such niceties. I knew the ravens didn’t. They would kill us either way, no matter how pretty Meg thought they were. Besides, calling ravens unkind and conspiratorial had always seemed redundant to me.

“They’re here because of Koronis,” I said miserably. “This is my fault.”

“Who’s Koronis?” Reyna demanded.

“Long story.” I yelled at the birds, “Guys, I’ve apologized a million times!”

The ravens croaked back angrily. A dozen more dropped out of the fog and began to circle us.

“They’ll tear us apart,” I said. “We have to retreat—back to the first platform.”

“The second platform is closer,” Reyna said. “Keep climbing!”

“Maybe they’re just checking us out,” Meg said. “Maybe they won’t attack.”

She shouldn’t have said that.

Ravens are contrary creatures. I should know—I shaped them into what they are. As soon as Meg expressed the hope that they wouldn’t attack, they did.

26

I'd like to sing a
Classic for you now. Thank you.
Please stop stabbing me.

IN RETROSPECT, I SHOULD have given ravens sponges for beaks—nice, soft, squishy sponges that weren't capable of stabbing. While I was at it, I should've thrown in some Nerf claws.

But nooo. I let them have beaks like serrated knives and claws like meat hooks. What had I been thinking?

Meg yelled as one of the birds dove by her, raking her arm.

Another flew at Reyna's legs. The praetor leveled a kick at it, but her heel missed the bird and connected with my nose.

"OWEEEEE!" I yelled, my whole face throbbing.

"My bad!" Reyna tried to climb, but the birds swirled around us, stabbing and clawing and tearing away bits of our clothes. The frenzy reminded me of my farewell concert in Thessalonika back in 235 BCE. (I liked to do a farewell tour every ten years or so, just to keep the fans guessing.) Dionysus had shown up with his entire horde of souvenir-hunting *maenads*. *Not* a good memory.

"Lester, who is Koronis?" Reyna shouted, drawing her sword. "Why were you apologizing to the birds?"

"I created them!" My busted nose made me sound like I was gargling syrup.

The ravens cawed in outrage. One swooped, its claws narrowly missing my left eye. Reyna swung her sword wildly, trying to keep the flock at bay.

“Well, can you *un*-create them?” Meg asked.

The ravens didn’t like that idea. One dove at Meg. She tossed it a seed—which, being a raven, it instinctively snapped out of the air. A pumpkin exploded to full growth in its beak. The raven, suddenly top-heavy with a mouth full of Halloween, plummeted toward the ground.

“Okay, I didn’t exactly *create* them,” I confessed. “I just changed them into what they are now. And, no, I can’t undo it.”

More angry cries from the birds, though for the moment they stayed away, wary of the girl with the sword and the other one with the tasty exploding seeds.

Tarquin had chosen the perfect guards to keep me from his silent god. Ravens *hated* me. They probably worked for free, without even a health plan, just hoping to have the chance to bring me down.

I suspected the only reason we were still alive was that the birds were trying to decide who got the honor of the kill.

Each angry croak was a claim to my tasty bits: *I get his liver!*

No, I *get his liver!*

Well, I get his kidneys, then!

Ravens are as greedy as they are contrary. Alas, we couldn’t count on them arguing with one another for long. We’d be dead as soon as they figured out their proper pecking order. (Oh, maybe *that’s* why they call it a *pecking order*!)

Reyna took a swipe at one that was getting too close. She glanced at the catwalk on the crossbeam above us, perhaps calculating whether she’d have time to reach it if she sheathed her sword. Judging from her frustrated expression, her conclusion was *no*.

“Lester, I need intel,” she said. “Tell me how we defeat these things.”

“I don’t know!” I wailed. “Look, back in the old days, ravens used to be gentle and white, like doves, okay? But they were *terrible* gossips. One time I was dating this girl, Koronis. The ravens found out she was cheating on me, and they told me about it. I was so angry, I got Artemis to kill Koronis for me. Then I punished the ravens for being tattletales by turning them black.”

Reyna stared at me like she was contemplating another kick to my nose. “That story is messed up on so many levels.”

“Just wrong,” Meg agreed. “You had your sister kill a girl who was cheating on you?”

“Well, I—”

“Then you punished the birds that told you about it,” Reyna added, “by turning them black, as if black was bad and white was good?”

“When you put it that way, it doesn’t sound right,” I protested. “It’s just what happened when my curse scorched them. It also made them nasty-tempered flesh-eaters.”

“Oh, that’s much better,” Reyna snarled.

“If we let the birds eat you,” Meg asked, “will they leave Reyna and me alone?”

“I—*What?*” I worried that Meg might not be kidding. Her facial expression did not say *kidding*. It said *serious about the birds eating you*. “Listen, I was angry! Yes, I took it out on the birds, but after a few centuries I cooled down. I apologized. By then, they kind of *liked* being nasty-tempered flesh-eaters. As for Koronis—I mean, at least I saved the child she was pregnant with when Artemis killed her. He became Asclepius, god of medicine!”

“Your girlfriend was *pregnant* when you had her killed?” Reyna launched another kick at my face. I managed to dodge it, since I’d had a lot of practice cowering, but it hurt to know that this time she hadn’t been aiming at an incoming raven. Oh, no. She *wanted* to knock my teeth in.

“You suck,” Meg agreed.

“Can we talk about this later?” I pleaded. “Or perhaps never? I was a *god* then! I didn’t know what I was doing!”

A few months ago, a statement like that would have made no sense to me. Now, it seemed true. I felt as if Meg had given me her thick-lensed rhinestone-studded glasses, and to my horror, they corrected my eyesight. I didn’t like how small and tawdry and petty everything looked, rendered in perfect ugly clarity through the magic of Meg-o-Vision. Most of all, I didn’t like the way *I* looked—not just present-day Lester, but the god formerly known as Apollo.

Reyna exchanged glances with Meg. They seemed to reach a silent agreement that the most practical course of action would be to survive the ravens now so they could kill me themselves later.

“We’re dead if we stay here.” Reyna swung her sword at another enthusiastic flesh-eater. “We can’t fend them off and climb at the same time. Ideas?”

The ravens had one. It was called *all-out attack*.

They swarmed—pecking, scratching, croaking with rage.

"I'm sorry!" I screamed, futilely swatting at the birds. "I'm sorry!"

The ravens did not accept my apology. Claws ripped my pant legs. A beak clamped on to my quiver and almost pulled me off the ladder, leaving my feet dangling for a terrifying moment.

Reyna continued to slash away. Meg cursed and threw seeds like party favors from the worst parade float ever. A giant raven spiraled out of control, covered in daffodils. Another fell like a stone, its stomach bulging in the shape of a butternut squash.

My grip weakened on the rungs. Blood dripped from my nose, but I couldn't spare a moment to wipe it away.

Reyna was right. If we didn't move, we were dead. And we couldn't move.

I scanned the crossbeam above us. If we could just reach it, we'd be able to stand and use our arms. We'd have a fighting chance to…well, *fight*.

At the far end of the catwalk, abutting the next support pylon, stood a large rectangular box like a shipping container. I was surprised I hadn't noticed it sooner, but compared to the scale of the tower, the container seemed small and insignificant, just another wedge of red metal. I had no idea what such a box was doing up here (A maintenance depot? A storage shed?) but if we could find a way inside, it might offer us shelter.

"Over there!" I yelled.

Reyna followed my gaze. "If we can reach it…We need to buy time. Apollo, what repels ravens? Isn't there something they hate?"

"Worse than *me*?"

"They don't like daffodils much," Meg observed, as another flower-festooned bird went into a tailspin.

"We need something to drive them *all* away," Reyna said, swinging her sword again. "Something they'll hate worse than Apollo." Her eyes lit up. "Apollo, sing for them!"

She might as well have kicked me in the face again. "My voice isn't *that* bad!"

"But you're the—You *used* to be the god of music, right? If you can charm a crowd, you should be able to repulse one. Pick a song these birds will hate!"

Great. Not only had Reyna laughed in my face and busted my nose, now I was her go-to guy for repulsiveness.

Still…I was struck by the way she said I *used to be* a god. She didn't seem to mean it as an insult. She said it almost like a concession—like she knew what a horrible deity I had been, but held out hope that I might be capable of being someone better, more helpful, maybe even worthy of forgiveness.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, let me think."

The ravens had no intention of letting me do that. They cawed and swarmed in a flurry of black feathers and pointy talons. Reyna and Meg tried their best to drive them back, but they couldn't cover me completely. A beak stabbed me in the neck, narrowly missing my carotid artery. Claws raked the side of my face, no doubt giving me some bloody new racing stripes.

I couldn't think about the pain.

I wanted to sing for Reyna, to prove that I had indeed changed. I was no longer the god who'd had Koronis killed and created ravens, or cursed the Cumaean Sibyl, or done any of the other selfish things that had once given me no more pause than choosing what dessert toppings I wanted on my ambrosia.

It was time to be helpful. I needed to be repulsive for my friends!

I rifled through millennia of performance memories, trying to recall any of my musical numbers that had totally bombed. Nope. I couldn't think of any. And the birds kept attacking….

Birds attacking.

An idea sparked at the base of my skull.

I remembered a story my children Austin and Kayla had told me, back when I was at Camp Half-Blood. We were sitting at the campfire, and they'd been joking about Chiron's bad taste in music. They said that several years earlier, Percy Jackson had managed to drive off a flock of killer Stymphalian birds simply by playing what Chiron had on his boom box.

What had he played? What was Chiron's favorite—?

"'VOLARE'!" I screamed.

Meg looked up at me, a random geranium stuck in her hair. "Who?"

"It's a song Dean Martin covered," I said. "It—it might be unacceptable to birds. I'm not sure."

"Well, *be* sure!" Reyna yelled. Ravens furiously scratched and pecked at her cloak, unable to tear the magical fabric, but her front side was unprotected. Every time she swung her sword, a bird swooped in, stabbing at

her exposed chest and arms. Her long-sleeve tee was quickly turning into a short-sleeve tee.

I channeled my worst King of Cool. I imagined I was on a Las Vegas stage, a line of empty martini glasses on the piano behind me. I was wearing a velvet tuxedo. I had just smoked a pack of cigarettes. In front of me sat a crowd full of adoring, tone-deaf fans.

"VOOO-LAR-RAAAAY!" I cried, modulating my voice to add about twenty syllables to the word. *"WHOA! OH!"*

The response from the ravens was immediate. They recoiled as if we'd suddenly become vegetarian entrées. Some threw themselves bodily against the metal girders, making the whole tower shudder.

"Keep going!" Meg yelled.

Phrased as an order, her words forced me to comply. With apologies to Domenico Modugno, who wrote the song, I gave "Volare" the full Dean Martin treatment.

It had once been such a lovely, obscure little tune. Originally, Modugno called it "Nel blu, dipinto di blu," which, granted, was a bad title. I don't know why artists insist on doing that. Like the Wallflowers' "One Headlight" obviously should have been titled "Me and Cinderella." And Ed Sheerhan's "The A-Team" should clearly have been called "Too Cold for Angels to Fly." I mean, come on, guys, you're burying the lede.

At any rate, "Nel blu, dipinto di blu" might have faded into obscurity had Dean Martin not gotten ahold of it, repackaged it as "Volare," added seven thousand violins and backup singers, and turned it into a sleazy lounge-singer classic.

I didn't have backup singers. All I had was my voice, but I did my best to be terrible. Even when I was a god and could speak any language I wanted, I'd never sung well in Italian. I kept mixing it up with Latin, so I came off sounding like Julius Caesar with a head cold. My newly busted nose just added to the awfulness.

I bellowed and warbled, screwing my eyes shut and clinging to the ladder as ravens flapped around me, croaking in horror at my travesty of a song. Far below, Reyna's greyhounds bayed as if they'd lost their mothers.

I became so engrossed in murdering "Volare," I didn't notice that the ravens had gone silent until Meg shouted, "APOLLO, ENOUGH!"

I faltered halfway through a chorus. When I opened my eyes, the ravens were nowhere in sight. From somewhere in the fog, their indignant caws

grew fainter and fainter as the flock moved off in search of quieter, less revolting prey.

"My ears," Reyna complained. "Oh, gods, my ears will never heal."

"The ravens will be back," I warned. My throat felt like the chute of a cement mixer. "As soon as they manage to purchase enough raven-size noise-canceling headphones, they'll be back. Now climb! I don't have another Dean Martin song in me."

27

Let's play guess the god.
Starts with H. *Wants to kill me.*
(Besides my stepmom.)

AS SOON AS I reached the catwalk, I gripped the rail. I wasn't sure if my legs were wobbly or if the entire tower was swaying. I felt like I was back on Poseidon's pleasure trireme—the one pulled by blue whales. *Oh, it's a smooth ride*, he'd promised. *You'll love it.*

Below, San Francisco stretched out in a rumpled quilt of green and gray, the edges frayed with fog. I felt a twinge of nostalgia for my days on the sun chariot. Oh, San Francisco! Whenever I saw that beautiful city below, I knew my day's journey was almost done. I could finally park my chariot at the Palace of the Sun, relax for the night, and let whatever other forces that controlled night and day take over for me. (Sorry, Hawaii. I love you, but I wasn't about to work overtime to give you a sunrise.)

The ravens were nowhere in sight. That didn't mean anything. A blanket of fog still obscured the top of the tower. The killers might swoop out of it at any minute. It wasn't fair that birds with twenty-foot wingspans could sneak up on us so easily.

At the far end of the catwalk sat the shipping container. The scent of roses was so strong now even I could smell it, and it seemed to be coming from the box. I took a step toward it and immediately stumbled.

"Careful." Reyna grabbed my arm.

A jolt of energy went through me, steadying my legs. Perhaps I imagined it. Or maybe I was just shocked that she had made physical contact with me

and it did not involve placing her boot in my face.

"I'm okay," I said. One godly skill had not abandoned me: lying.

"You need medical attention," Reyna said. "Your face is a horror show."

"Thanks."

"I've got supplies," Meg announced.

She rummaged through the pouches of her gardening belt. I was terrified she might try to patch my face with flowering bougainvillea, but instead she pulled out tape, gauze, and alcohol wipes. I supposed her time with Pranjal had taught her more than just how to use a cheese grater.

She fussed over my face, then checked me and Reyna for any especially deep cuts and punctures. We had plenty. Soon all three of us looked like refugees from George Washington's camp at Valley Forge. We could have spent the whole afternoon bandaging each other, but we didn't have that much time.

Meg turned to regard the shipping container. She still had a stubborn geranium stuck in her hair. Her tattered dress rippled around her like shreds of seaweed.

"What is that thing?" she wondered. "What's it doing up here, and why does it smell like roses?"

Good questions.

Judging scale and distance on the tower was difficult. Tucked against the girders, the shipping container looked close and small, but it was probably a full city block away from us, and larger than Marlon Brando's personal trailer on the set of *The Godfather*. (Wow, where did that memory come from? Crazy times.) Installing that huge red box on Sutro Tower would have been a massive undertaking. Then again, the Triumvirate had enough cash to purchase fifty luxury yachts, so they could probably afford a few cargo helicopters.

The bigger question was *why?*

From the sides of the container, glimmering bronze and gold cables snaked outward, weaving around the pylon and crossbeams like grounding wires, connecting to satellite dishes, cellular arrays, and power boxes. Was there some sort of monitoring station inside? The world's most expensive hothouse for roses? Or perhaps the most elaborate scheme ever to steal premium cable-TV channels.

The closest end of the box was fitted with cargo doors, the vertical locking rods laced with rows of heavy chains. Whatever was inside was

meant to stay there.

"Any ideas?" Reyna asked.

"Try to get inside that container," I said. "It's a terrible idea. But it's the only one I have."

"Yeah." Reyna scanned the fog over our heads. "Let's move before the ravens come back for an encore."

Meg summoned her swords. She led the way across the catwalk, but after twenty feet or so, she stopped abruptly, as if she'd run into an invisible wall.

She turned to face us. "Guys, is…me or…feel weird?"

I thought the kick to my face might have short-circuited my brain. "What, Meg?"

"I said…wrong, like…cold and…"

I glanced at Reyna. "Did you hear that?"

"Only half of her words are coming through. Why aren't *our* voices affected?"

I studied the short expanse of catwalk separating us from Meg. An unpleasant suspicion wriggled in my head. "Meg, take a step back toward me, please."

"Why…want…?"

"Just humor me."

She did. "So are you guys feeling weird, too? Like, kinda cold?" She frowned. "Wait…it's better now."

"You were dropping words," Reyna said.

"I was?"

The girls looked at me for an explanation. Sadly, I thought I might have one—or at least the beginnings of one. The metaphorical truck with the metaphorical headlights was getting closer to metaphorically running me over.

"You two wait here for a second," I said. "I want to try something."

I took a few steps toward the shipping container. When I reached the spot where Meg had been standing, I felt the difference—as if I'd stepped across the threshold of a walk-in freezer.

Another ten feet and I couldn't hear the wind anymore, or the pinging of metal cables against the sides of the tower, or the blood rushing in my ears. I snapped my fingers. No sound.

Panic rose in my chest. Complete silence—a music god's worst nightmare.

I faced Reyna and Meg. I tried to shout, “Can you hear me now?”

Nothing. My vocal cords vibrated, but the sound waves seemed to die before they left my mouth.

Meg said something I couldn’t hear. Reyna spread her arms.

I gestured for them to wait. Then I took a deep breath and forced myself to keep going toward the box. I stopped within an arm’s length of the cargo doors.

The rose-bouquet smell was definitely coming from inside. The chains across the locking rods were heavy Imperial gold—enough rare magical metal to buy a decent-size palace on Mount Olympus. Even in my mortal form, I could feel the power radiating from the container—not just the heavy silence, but the cold, needling aura of wards and curses placed on the metal doors and walls. To keep us out. To keep something in.

On the left-hand door, stenciled in white paint, was a single word in Arabic:

الإسكندرية

My Arabic was even rustier than my Dean Martin Italian, but I was fairly sure it was the name of a city. ALEXANDRIA. As in Alexandria, Egypt.

My knees almost buckled. My vision swam. I might have sobbed, though I couldn’t hear it.

Slowly, gripping the rail for support, I staggered back to my friends. I only knew I’d left the zone of silence when I could hear myself muttering, “No, no, no, no.”

Meg caught me before I could fall over. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I think I understand,” I said. “The soundless god.”

“Who is it?” Reyna asked.

“I don’t know.”

Reyna blinked. “But you just said—”

“I think I *understand*. Remembering who it is exactly—that’s harder. I’m pretty sure we’re dealing with a Ptolemaic god, from back in the days when the Greeks ruled Egypt.”

Meg looked past me at the container. “So there’s a god in the box.”

I shuddered, remembering the short-lived fast food franchise Hermes had once tried to open on Mount Olympus. Thankfully, God-in-the-Box never took off. “Yes, Meg. A very minor Egyptian-Greek hybrid god, I think,

which is most likely why he couldn't be found in the Camp Jupiter archives."

"If he's so minor," Reyna said, "why do you look so scared?"

A bit of my old Olympian haughtiness surged through me. *Mortals.* They could never understand.

"Ptolemaic gods are *awful*," I said. "They're unpredictable, temperamental, dangerous, insecure—"

"Like a normal god, then," Meg said.

"I hate you," I said.

"I thought you loved me."

"I'm multitasking. Roses were this god's symbol. I—I don't remember why. A connection to Venus? He was in charge of secrets. In the old days, if leaders hung a rose from the ceiling of a conference room, it meant everybody in that conversation was sworn to secrecy. They called it *sub rosa*, under the rose."

"So you know all that," Reyna said, "but you don't know the god's name?"

"I—He's—" A frustrated growl rose from my throat. "I *almost* have it. I *should* have it. But I haven't thought about this god in millennia. He's *very* obscure. It's like asking me to remember the name of a particular backup singer I worked with during the Renaissance. Perhaps if you hadn't kicked me in the head—"

"After that story about Koronis?" Reyna said. "You deserved it."

"You did," Meg agreed.

I sighed. "You two are horrible influences on each other."

Without taking their eyes off me, Reyna and Meg gave each other a silent high five.

"Fine," I grumbled. "Maybe the Arrow of Dodona can help jog my memory. At least he insults me in flowery Shakespearean language."

I drew the arrow from my quiver. "O prophetic missile, I need your guidance!"

There was no answer.

I wondered if the arrow had been lulled to sleep by the magic surrounding the storage container. Then I realized there was a simpler explanation. I returned the arrow to my quiver and pulled out a different one.

"You chose the wrong arrow, didn't you?" Meg guessed.

“No!” I snapped. “You just don’t understand my process. I’m going back into the sphere of silence now.”

“But—”

I marched away before Meg could finish.

Only when I was I surrounded by cold silence again did it occur to me that it might be hard to carry on a conversation with the arrow if I couldn’t talk.

No matter. I was too proud to retreat. If the arrow and I couldn’t communicate telepathically, I would just pretend to have an intelligent conversation while Reyna and Meg looked on.

“O prophetic missile!” I tried again. My vocal cords vibrated, though no sound came out—a disturbing sensation I can only compare to drowning. “I need your guidance!”

CONGRATULATIONS, said the arrow. Its voice resonated in my head—more tactile than audible—rattling my eyeballs.

“Thanks,” I said. “Wait. Congratulations for what?”

THOU HAST FOUND THY GROOVE. AT LEAST THE BEGINNINGS OF THY GROOVE. I SUSPECTED THIS WOULD BE SO, GIVEN TIME. CONGRATULATIONS ARE MERITED.

“Oh.” I stared at the arrow’s point, waiting for a *but*. None came. I was so surprised, I could only stutter, “Th-thanks.”

THOU ART MOST WELCOME.

“Did we just have a polite exchange?”

AYE, the arrow mused. *MOST TROUBLING. BY THE BY, WHAT “PROCESS” WERT THOU SPEAKING OF TO YON MAIDENS? THOU HAST NO PROCESS SAVE FUMBLING.*

“Here we go,” I muttered. “Please, my memory needs a jump start. This soundless god…he’s that guy from Egypt, isn’t he?”

WELL-REASONED, SIRRAH, the arrow said. *THOU HAST NARROWED IT DOWN TO ALL THE GUYS IN EGYPT.*

“You know what I mean. There was that—that one Ptolemaic god. The strange dude. He was a god of silence and secrets. But he wasn’t, exactly. If you can just give me his name, I think the rest of my memories will shake loose.”

IS MY WISDOM SO CHEAPLY BOUGHT? DOST THOU EXPECT TO WIN HIS NAME WITH NO EFFORT?

“What do you call climbing Sutro Tower?” I demanded. “Getting slashed to pieces by ravens, kicked in the face, and forced to sing like Dean Martin?”

AMUSING.

I may have yelled a few choice words, but the sphere of silence censored them, so you will have to use your imagination.

“Fine,” I said. “Can you at least give me a hint?”

VERILY, THE NAME DOTH BEGIN WITH AN H.

“Hephaestus…Hermes…Hera…A lot of gods’ names begin with *H*!”

HERA? ART THOU SERIOUS?

“I’m just brainstorming. *H*, you say….”

THINK OF THY FAVORITE PHYSICIAN.

“Me. Wait. My son Asclepius.”

The arrow’s sigh rattled my entire skeleton. *YOUR FAVORITE* MORTAL *PHYSICIAN.*

“Doctor Kildare. Doctor Doom. Doctor House. Doctor—Oh! You mean Hippocrates. But he’s not a Ptolemaic god.”

THOU ART KILLING ME, the arrow complained. *“HIPPOCRATES” IS THY HINT. THE NAME THOU SEEKEST IS MOST LIKE IT. THOU NEEDEST BUT CHANGE TWO LETTERS.*

“Which two?” I felt petulant, but I’d never enjoyed word puzzles, even before my horrific experience in the Burning Maze.

I SHALL GIVE THEE ONE LAST HINT, said the arrow. *THINK OF THY FAVORITE MARX BROTHER.*

“The Marx Brothers? How do you even *know* about them? They were from the 1930s! I mean, yes, of course, I loved them. They brightened a dreary decade, but…Wait. The one who played the harp. Harpo. I always found his music sweet and sad and…”

The silence turned colder and heavier around me.

Harpo, I thought. *Hippocrates. Put the names together and you got…*

“Harpocrates,” I said. “Arrow, please tell me that’s not the answer. Please tell me he’s not waiting in that box.”

The arrow did not reply, which I took as confirmation of my worst fears.

I returned my Shakespearean friend to his quiver and trudged back to Reyna and Meg.

Meg frowned. “I don’t like that look on your face.”

“Me neither,” Reyna said. “What did you learn?”

I gazed out at the fog, wishing we could deal with something as easy as killer giant ravens. As I suspected, the name of the god had shaken loose my memories—bad, unwelcome memories.

"I know which god we face," I said. "The good news is he's not very powerful, as gods go. About as obscure as you can imagine. A real D-lister."

Reyna folded her arms. "What's the catch?"

"Ah…well." I cleared my throat. "Harpocrates and I didn't exactly get along. He might have…er, sworn that someday he'd see me vaporized."

28

We all need a hand
On our shoulder sometimes so
We can chew through steel

“VAPORIZED,” SAID REYNA.

“Yes.”

“What did you do to him?” Meg asked.

I tried to look offended. “Nothing! I may have teased him a bit, but he was a very *minor* god. Rather silly-looking. I may have made some jokes at his expense in front of the other Olympians.”

Reyna knit her eyebrows. “So you bullied him.”

“No! I mean…I did write *zap me* in glowing letters on the back of his toga. And I suppose I might have been a bit harsh when I tied him up and locked him in the stalls with my fiery horses overnight—”

“OH, MY GODS!” Meg said. “You’re awful!”

I fought down the urge to defend myself. I wanted to shout, *Well, at least I didn’t kill him like I did my pregnant girlfriend Koronis!* But that wasn’t much of a gotcha.

Looking back on my encounters with Harpocrates, I realized I *had* been awful. If somebody had treated me, Lester, the way I had treated that puny Ptolemaic god, I would want to crawl in a hole and die. And if I were honest, even back when I was a god, I had been bullied—only the bully had been my father. I should have known better than to share the pain.

I hadn’t thought about Harpocrates in eons. Teasing him had seemed like no big deal. I suppose that’s what made it even worse. I had shrugged off our

encounters. I doubted he had.

Koronis's ravens…Harpocrates…

It was no coincidence they were both haunting me today like the Ghosts of Saturnalias Past. Tarquin had orchestrated all this with *me* in mind. He was forcing me to confront some of my greatest hits of dreadfulness. Even if I survived the challenges, my friends would see exactly what kind of dirtbag I was. The shame would weigh me down and make me ineffective—the same way Tarquin used to add rocks to a cage around his enemy's head, until eventually, the burden was too much. The prisoner would collapse and drown in a shallow pool, and Tarquin could claim, *I didn't kill him. He just wasn't strong enough.*

I took a deep breath. "All right, I was a bully. I see that now. I will march right into that box and apologize. And then hope Harpocrates doesn't vaporize me."

Reyna did not look thrilled. She pushed up her sleeve, revealing a simple black watch on her wrist. She checked the time, perhaps wondering how long it would take to get me vaporized and then get back to camp.

"Assuming we can get through those doors," she said, "what are we up against? Tell me about Harpocrates."

I tried to summon a mental image of the god. "He usually looks like a child. Perhaps ten years old?"

"You bullied a ten-year-old," Meg grumbled.

"He *looks* ten. I didn't say he *was* ten. He has a shaved head except for a ponytail on one side."

"Is that an Egyptian thing?" Reyna asked.

"Yes, for children. Harpocrates was originally an incarnation of the god Horus—Harpa-Khruti, Horus the Child. Anyway, when Alexander the Great invaded Egypt, the Greeks found all these statues of the god and didn't know what to make of him. He was usually depicted with his finger to his lips." I demonstrated.

"Like *be quiet*," Meg said.

"That's exactly what the Greeks thought. The gesture had nothing to do with *shh*. It symbolized the hieroglyph for *child*. Nevertheless, the Greeks decided he must be the god of silence and secrets. They changed his name to Harpocrates. They built some shrines, started worshipping him, and boom, he's a Greek-Egyptian hybrid god."

Meg snorted. "It can't be that easy to make a new god."

“Never underestimate the power of thousands of human minds all believing the same thing. They can remake reality. Sometimes for the better, sometimes not.”

Reyna peered at the doors. “And now Harpocrates is in there. You think he’s powerful enough to cause all our communications failures?”

“He shouldn’t be. I don’t understand how—”

“Those cables.” Meg pointed. “They’re connecting the box to the tower. Could they be boosting his signal somehow? Maybe that’s why he’s up here.”

Reyna nodded appreciatively. “Meg, next time I need to set up a gaming console, I’m calling you. Maybe we could just cut the cables and not open the box.”

I loved that idea, which was a pretty good indication it wouldn’t work.

“It won’t be enough,” I decided. “The daughter of Bellona has to open the door to the soundless god, right? And for our ritual summoning to work, we need the last breath of the god after his…um, soul is cut free.”

Talking about the Sibylline recipe in the safety of the praetors’ office had been one thing. Talking about it on Sutro Tower, facing the god’s big red shipping container, was quite another.

I felt a deep sense of unease that had nothing to do with the cold, or the proximity of the sphere of silence, or even the zombie poison circulating in my blood. A few moments ago, I had admitted to bullying Harpocrates. I had decided to apologize. Then what? I would kill him for the sake of a prophecy? Another rock plopped into the invisible cage around my head.

Meg must have felt similarly. She made her best *I-don’t-wanna* scowl and started fidgeting with the tatters of her dress. “We don’t really have to… you know, do we? I mean even if this Harpo guy is working for the emperors…”

“I don’t think he is.” Reyna nodded toward the chains on the locking rods. “It looks like he’s being kept *in*. He’s a prisoner.”

“That’s even worse,” Meg said.

From where I stood, I could just make out the white stenciled Arabic for *Alexandria* on the door of the container. I imagined the Triumvirate digging up Harpocrates from some buried temple in the Egyptian desert, wrestling him into that box, then shipping him off to America like third-class freight. The emperors would’ve considered Harpocrates just another dangerous, amusing plaything, like their trained monsters and humanoid lackeys.

And why not let King Tarquin be his custodian? The emperors could ally themselves with the undead tyrant, at least temporarily, to make their invasion of Camp Jupiter a little easier. They could let Tarquin arrange his cruelest trap for me. Whether I killed Harpocrates or he killed me, what did it matter to the Triumvirate in the end? Either way, they would find it entertaining—one more gladiator match to break the monotony of their immortal lives.

Pain flared from the stab wound in my neck. I realized I'd been clenching my jaw in anger.

"There has to be another way," I said. "The prophecy *can't* mean for us to kill Harpocrates. Let's talk to him. Figure something out."

"How can we," Reyna asked, "if he radiates silence?"

"That…that's a good question," I admitted. "First things first. We have to get those doors open. Can you two cut the chains?"

Meg looked scandalized. "With my *swords*?"

"Well, I thought they would work better than your teeth, but you tell me."

"Guys," said Reyna. "Imperial gold blades hacking away at Imperial gold chains? Maybe we could cut through, but we'd be here until nightfall. We don't have that kind of time. I've got another idea. Godly strength."

She looked at me.

"But I don't have any!" I protested.

"You got your archery skills back," she said. "You got your musical skills back."

"That Valerie song didn't count," Meg said.

"'Volare,'" I corrected.

"The point is," Reyna continued, "I may be able to boost your strength. I think that might be why I'm here."

I thought about the jolt of energy I'd felt when Reyna touched my arm. It hadn't been physical attraction, or a warning buzz from Venus. I recalled something she had told Frank before we left camp. "Bellona's power," I said. "It has something to do with strength in numbers?"

Reyna nodded. "I can amplify other people's abilities. The bigger the group, the better it works, but even with three people…it might be sufficient to enhance your power enough to rip open those doors."

"Would that count?" Meg asked. "I mean, if Reyna doesn't open the door herself, isn't that cheating the prophecy?"

Reyna shrugged. “Prophecies never mean what you think, right? If Apollo is able to open the door thanks to my help, I’m still responsible, wouldn’t you say?”

“Besides…” I pointed to the horizon. Hours of daylight remained, but the full moon was rising, enormous and white, over the hills of Marin County. Soon enough, it would turn bloodred—and so, I feared, would a whole lot of our friends. “We’re running out of time. If we can cheat, let’s cheat.”

I realized those would make terrible final words. Nevertheless, Reyna and Meg followed me into the cold silence.

When we reached the doors, Reyna took Meg’s hand. She turned to me: *Ready?* Then she planted her other hand on my shoulder.

Strength surged through me. I laughed with soundless joy. I felt as potent as I had in the woods at Camp Half-Blood, when I’d tossed one of Nero’s barbarian bodyguards into low earth orbit. Reyna’s power was awesome! If I could just get her to follow me around the whole time I was mortal, her hand on my shoulder, a chain of twenty or thirty other demigods behind her, I bet there was nothing I couldn’t accomplish!

I grabbed the uppermost chains and tore them like crepe paper. Then the next set, and the next. The Imperial gold broke and crumpled noiselessly in my fists. The steel locking rods felt as soft as breadsticks as I pulled them out of their fittings.

That left only the door handles.

The power may have gone to my head. I glanced back at Reyna and Meg with a self-satisfied smirk, ready to accept their silent adulation.

Instead, they looked as if I’d bent *them* in half, too.

Meg swayed, her complexion lima-bean green. The skin around Reyna’s eyes was tight with pain. The veins on her temples stood out like lightning bolts. My energy surge was frying them.

Finish it, Reyna mouthed. Her eyes added a silent plea: *Before we pass out.*

Humbled and ashamed, I grabbed the door handles. My friends had gotten me this far. If Harpocrates was indeed waiting inside this shipping box, I would make sure the full force of his anger fell on me, not Reyna or Meg.

I yanked open the doors and stepped inside.

29

Ever heard the phrase
“The silence is deafening”?
Yeah, that’s a real thing

IMMEDIATELY, I CRUMPLED TO my hands and knees under the weight of the other god’s power.

Silence enfolded me like liquid titanium. The cloying smell of roses was overwhelming.

I’d forgotten how Harpocrates communicated—with blasts of mental images, oppressive and devoid of sound. Back when I was a god, I’d found this annoying. Now, as a human, I realized it could pulp my brain. At the moment, he was sending me one continuous message: *YOU? HATE!*

Behind me, Reyna was on her knees, cupping her ears and screaming mutely. Meg was curled on her side, kicking her legs as if trying to throw off the heaviest of blankets.

A moment before, I’d been tearing through metal like it was paper. Now, I could barely lift my head to meet Harpocrates’s gaze.

The god floated cross-legged at the far end of the room.

He was still the size of a ten-year-old child, still wearing his ridiculous toga and pharaonic bowling-pin crown combo, like so many confused Ptolemaic gods who couldn’t decide if they were Egyptian or Greco-Roman. His braided ponytail snaked down one side of his shaved head. And, of course, he still held one finger to his mouth like the most frustrated, burned-out librarian in the world: *SSSHHH!*

He could not do otherwise. I recalled that Harpocrates required all his willpower to lower his finger from his mouth. As soon as he stopped concentrating, his hand would pop right back into position. In the old days, I had found that hilarious. Now, not so much.

The centuries had not been kind to him. His skin was wrinkled and saggy. His once-bronze complexion was an unhealthy porcelain color. His sunken eyes smoldered with anger and self-pity.

Imperial gold fetters were clamped around Harpocrates's wrists and ankles, connecting him to a web of chains, cords, and cables—some hooked up to elaborate control panels, others channeled through holes in the walls of the container, leading out to the tower's superstructure. The setup seemed designed to siphon Harpocrates's power and then amplify it—to broadcast his magical silence across the world. This was the source of all our communications troubles—one sad, angry, forgotten little god.

It took me a moment to understand why he remained imprisoned. Even drained of his power, a minor deity should have been able to break a few chains. Harpocrates seemed to be alone and unguarded.

Then I noticed them. Floating on either side of the god, so entangled in chains that they were hard to distinguish from the general chaos of machinery and wires, were two objects I hadn't seen in centuries: identical ceremonial axes, each about four feet tall, with a crescent blade and a thick bundle of wooden rods fastened around the shaft.

Fasces. The ultimate symbol of Roman might.

Looking at them made my ribs twist into bows. In the old days, powerful Roman officials never left home without a procession of *lictor* bodyguards, each carrying one of those bundled axes to let the commoners know somebody important was coming through. The more fasces, the more important the official.

In the twentieth century, Benito Mussolini revived the symbol when he became Italy's dictator. His ruling philosophy was named after those bundled axes: *Fascism*.

But the fasces in front of me were no ordinary standards. These blades were Imperial gold. Wrapped around the bundles of rods were silken banners embroidered with the names of their owners. Enough of the letters were visible that I could guess what they said. On the left: CAESAR MARCUS AURELIUS COMMODUS ANTONINUS AUGUSTUS. On the right: GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR AUGUSTUS GERMANICUS, otherwise known as Caligula.

These were the personal fasces of the two emperors, being used to drain Harpocrates's power and keep him enslaved.

The god glared at me. He forced painful images into my mind: me stuffing his head into a toilet on Mount Olympus; me howling with amusement as I tied his wrists and ankles and shut him in the stables with my fire-breathing horses. Dozens of other encounters I'd completely forgotten about, and in all of them I was as golden, handsome, and powerful as any Triumvirate emperor—and just as cruel.

My skull throbbed from the pressure of Harpocrates's assault. I felt capillaries bursting in my busted nose, my forehead, my ears. Behind me, Reyna and Meg writhed in agony. Reyna locked eyes with me, blood trickling from her nostrils. She seemed to ask, *Well, genius? What now?*

I crawled closer to Harpocrates.

Tentatively, using a series of mental pictures, I tried to convey a question: *How did you get here?*

I imagined Caligula and Commodus overpowering him, binding him, forcing him to do their bidding. I imagined Harpocrates floating alone in this dark box for months, years, unable to break free from the power of the fasces, growing weaker and weaker as the emperors used his silence to keep the demigod camps in the dark, cut off from one another, while the Triumvirate divided and conquered.

Harpocrates was their prisoner, not their ally.

Was I right?

Harpocrates replied with a withering gust of resentment.

I took that to mean both *Yes* and *You suck, Apollo.*

He forced more visions into my mind. I saw Commodus and Caligula standing where I now was, smiling cruelly, taunting him.

You should be on our side, Caligula told him telepathically. *You should* want *to help us!*

Harpocrates had refused. Perhaps he couldn't overpower his bullies, but he intended to fight them with every last bit of his soul. That's why he now looked so withered.

I sent out a pulse of sympathy and regret. Harpocrates blasted it away with scorn.

Just because we both hated the Triumvirate did not make us friends. Harpocrates had never forgotten my cruelty. If he hadn't been constrained by

the fasces, he would have already blasted me and my friends into a fine mist of atoms.

He showed me that image in vivid color. I could tell he relished thinking about it.

Meg tried to join our telepathic argument. At first, all she could send was a garbled sense of pain and confusion. Then she managed to focus. I saw her father smiling down at her, handing her a rose. For her, the rose was a symbol of love, not secrets. Then I saw her father dead on the steps of Grand Central Station, murdered by Nero. She sent Harpocrates her life story, captured in a few painful snapshots. She knew about monsters. She had been raised by the Beast. No matter how much Harpocrates hated me—and Meg agreed that I could be pretty stupid sometimes—we had to work together to stop the Triumvirate.

Harpocrates shredded her thoughts with rage. How dare she presume to understand his misery?

Reyna tried a different approach. She shared her memories of Tarquin's last attack on Camp Jupiter: so many wounded and killed, their bodies dragged off by ghouls to be reanimated as vrykolakai. She showed Harpocrates her greatest fear: that after all their battles, after centuries of upholding the best traditions of Rome, the Twelfth Legion might face their end tonight.

Harpocrates was unmoved. He bent his will toward me, burying me in hatred.

All right! I pleaded. *Kill me if you must. But I am sorry! I have changed!*

I sent him a flurry of the most horrible, embarrassing failures I'd suffered since becoming mortal: grieving over the body of Heloise the griffin at the Waystation, holding the dying pandos Crest in my arms in the Burning Maze, and, of course, watching helplessly as Caligula murdered Jason Grace.

Just for a moment, Harpocrates's wrath wavered.

At the very least, I had managed to surprise him. He had not been expecting regret or shame from me. Those weren't my trademark emotions.

If you let us destroy the fasces, I thought, *that will free you. It will also hurt the emperors, yes?*

I showed him a vision of Reyna and Meg cutting through the fasces with their swords, the ceremonial axes exploding.

Yes, Harpocrates thought back, adding a brilliant red tint to the vision.

I had offered him something he wanted.

Reyna chimed in. She pictured Commodus and Caligula on their knees, groaning in pain. The fasces were connected to them. They'd taken a great risk leaving their axes here. If the fasces were destroyed, the emperors might be weakened and vulnerable before the battle.

Yes, Harpocrates replied. The pressure of the silence eased. I could almost breathe again without agony. Reyna staggered to her feet. She helped Meg and me to stand.

Unfortunately, we were not out of danger. I imagined any number of terrible things Harpocrates could do to us if we freed him. And since I'd been talking with my mind, I couldn't help but broadcast those fears.

Harpocrates's glare did nothing to reassure me.

The emperors must have anticipated this. They were smart, cynical, horribly logical. They knew that if I did release Harpocrates, the god's first act would probably be to kill me. For the emperors, the potential loss of their fasces apparently didn't outweigh the potential benefit of having me destroyed…or the entertainment value of knowing I'd done it to myself.

Reyna touched my shoulder, making me flinch involuntarily. She and Meg had drawn their weapons. They were waiting for me to decide. Did I really want to risk this?

I studied the soundless god.

Do what you want with me, I thought to him. *Just spare my friends. Please.*

His eyes burned with malice, but also a hint of glee. He seemed to be waiting for me to realize something, as if he'd written ZAP ME on my backpack when I wasn't looking.

Then I saw what he was holding in his lap. I hadn't noticed it while I was down on my hands and knees, but now that I was standing, it was hard to miss: a glass jar, apparently empty, sealed with a metal lid.

I felt as if Tarquin had just dropped the final rock into the drowning cage around my head. I imagined the emperors howling with delight on the deck of Caligula's yacht.

Rumors from centuries before swirled in my head: *The Sibyl's body had crumbled away…. She could not die…. Her attendants kept her life force… her voice…in a glass jar.*

Harpocrates cradled all that remained of the Sibyl of Cumae—another person who had every reason to hate me; a person the emperors and Tarquin

knew I would feel obligated to help.

They had left me the starkest of choices: run away, let the Triumvirate win, and watch my mortal friends be destroyed, or free two bitter enemies and face the same fate as Jason Grace.

It was an easy decision.

I turned to Reyna and Meg and thought as clearly as I could: *Destroy the fasces. Cut him free.*

30

A voice and a shh.
I have seen stranger couples.
Wait. No, I haven't.

TURNS OUT THAT WAS a bad idea.

Reyna and Meg moved cautiously—as one does when approaching a cornered wild animal or an angry immortal. They took up positions on either side of Harpocrates, raised their blades above the fasces, and mouthed in unison: *One, two, three!*

It was almost like the fasces had been waiting to explode. Despite Reyna's earlier protestations that Imperial gold blades might take forever to hack through Imperial gold chains, her sword and Meg's cut through the cords and cables as if they were nothing but illusions themselves.

Their blades hit the fasces and shattered them—sending bundles of rods blasting into splinters, shafts breaking, golden crescents toppling to the floor.

The girls stepped back, clearly surprised by their own success.

Harpocrates gave me a thin, cruel smile.

Without a sound, the fetters on his hands and feet cracked and fell away like spring ice. The remaining cables and chains shriveled and blackened, curling against the walls. Harpocrates stretched out his free hand—the one that was not gesturing, *Shh, I'm about to kill you*—and the two golden ax blades from the broken fasces flew into his grip. His fingers turned white hot. The blades melted, gold dribbling through his fingers and pooling beneath him.

A small, terrified voice in my head said, *Well, this is going great.*

The god plucked the glass jar from his lap. He raised it on his fingertips like a crystal ball. For a moment, I was afraid he would give it the gold-ax treatment, melting whatever remained of the Sibyl just to spite me.

Instead, he assaulted my mind with new images.

I saw a eurynomos lope into Harpocrates's prison, the glass jar tucked under one arm. The ghoul's mouth slavered. Its eyes glowed purple.

Harpocrates thrashed in his chains. It seemed he had not been in the box very long at that point. He wanted to crush the eurynomos with silence, but the ghoul seemed unaffected. His body was being driven by another mind, far away in the tyrant's tomb.

Even through telepathy, it was clear the voice was Tarquin's—heavy and brutal as chariot wheels over flesh.

I brought you a friend, he said. *Try not to break her.*

He tossed the jar to Harpocrates, who caught it out of surprise. Tarquin's possessed ghoul limped away, chuckling evilly, and chained the doors behind him.

Alone in the dark, Harpocrates's first thought was to smash the jar. Anything from Tarquin had to be a trap, or poison, or something worse. But he was curious. *A friend?* Harpocrates had never had one of those. He wasn't sure he understood the concept.

He could sense a living force inside the jar: weak, sad, fading, but alive, and possibly more ancient than he was. He opened the lid. The faintest voice began to speak to him, cutting straight through his silence as if it didn't exist.

After so many millennia, Harpocrates, the silent god who was never supposed to exist, had almost forgotten *sound*. He wept with joy. The god and the Sibyl began to converse.

They both knew they were pawns, prisoners. They were only here because they served some purpose for the emperors and their new ally, Tarquin. Like Harpocrates, the Sibyl had refused to cooperate with her captors. She would tell them nothing of the future. Why should she? She was beyond pain and suffering. She had literally nothing left to lose and longed only to die.

Harpocrates shared the feeling. He was tired of spending millennia slowly wasting away, waiting until he was obscure enough, forgotten by all humankind, so he could cease to exist altogether. His life had always been bitter—a never-ending parade of disappointments, bullying, and ridicule. Now he wanted sleep. The eternal sleep of extinct gods.

They shared stories. They bonded over their hatred of me. They realized that Tarquin wanted this to happen. He had thrown them together, hoping they'd become friends, so he could use them as leverage against each other. But they couldn't help their feelings.

Wait. I interrupted Harpocrates's story. *Are you two…* together*?*

I shouldn't have asked. I didn't mean to send such an incredulous thought, like how does a *shh* god fall in love with a voice in a glass jar?

Harpocrates's rage pressed down on me, making my knees buckle. The air pressure increased, as if I'd plummeted a thousand feet. I almost blacked out, but I guessed Harpocrates wouldn't let that happen. He wanted me conscious, able to suffer.

He flooded me with bitterness and hate. My joints began to unknit, my vocal cords dissolving. Harpocrates might have been ready to die, but that didn't mean he wouldn't kill me first. That would bring him great satisfaction.

I bowed my head, gritting my teeth against the inevitable.

Fine, I thought. *I deserve it. Just spare my friends. Please.*

The pressure eased.

I glanced up through a haze of pain.

In front of me, Reyna and Meg stood shoulder to shoulder, facing down the god.

They sent him their own flurry of images. Reyna pictured me singing "The Fall of Jason Grace" to the legion, officiating at Jason's funeral pyre with tears in my eyes, then looking goofy and awkward and clueless as I offered to be her boyfriend, giving her the best, most cleansing laugh she'd had in years. (Thanks, Reyna.)

Meg pictured the way I'd saved her in the *myrmekes*' lair at Camp Half-Blood, singing about my romantic failures with such honesty it rendered giant ants catatonic with depression. She envisioned my kindness to Livia the elephant, to Crest, and especially to her, when I'd given her a hug in our room at the café and told her I would never give up trying.

In all their memories, I looked so *human*…but in the best possible ways. Without words, my friends asked Harpocrates if I was still the person he hated so much.

The god scowled, considering the two young women.

Then a small voice spoke—actually *spoke*—from inside the sealed glass jar. "Enough."

As faint and muffled as her voice was, I should not have been able to hear it. Only the utter silence of the shipping container made her audible, though how she cut through Harpocrates's dampening field, I had no idea. It was definitely the Sibyl. I recognized her defiant tone, the same way she'd sounded centuries before, when she vowed never to love me until every grain of sand ran out: *Come back to me at the end of that time. Then, if you still want me, I'm yours.*

Now, here we were, at the wrong end of forever, neither of us in the right form to choose the other.

Harpocrates regarded the jar, his expression turning sad and plaintive. He seemed to ask, *Are you sure?*

"This is what I have foreseen," whispered the Sibyl. "At last, we will rest."

A new image appeared in my mind—verses from the Sibylline Books, purple letters against white skin, so bright it made me squint. The words smoked as if fresh from a harpy tattoo-artist's needle: *Add the last breath of the god who speaks not, once his soul is cut free, together with the shattered glass.*

Harpocrates must have seen the words, too, judging from the way he winced. I waited for him to process their meaning, to get angry again, to decide that if anyone's soul should be cut free, it should be mine.

When I was a god, I rarely thought about the passage of time. A few centuries here or there, what did it matter? Now I considered just how long ago the Sibyl had written those lines. They had been scribbled into the original Sibylline Books back when Rome was still a puny kingdom. Had the Sibyl known even then what they meant? Had she realized she would end up as nothing but a voice in a jar, stuck in this dark metal box with her boyfriend who smelled like roses and looked like a withered ten-year-old in a toga and a bowling-pin crown? If so, how could she not want to kill me even more than Harpocrates did?

The god peered into the container, maybe having a private telepathic conversation with his beloved Sibyl.

Reyna and Meg shifted, doing their best to block me from the god's line of sight. Perhaps they thought if he couldn't see me, he might forget I was there. I felt awkward peeking around their legs, but I was so drained and light-headed I doubted I could stand.

No matter what images Harpocrates had shown me, or how weary he was of life, I couldn't imagine he would just roll over and surrender. *Oh, you need to kill me for your prophecy thingie? Okay, sure! Stab me right here!*

I definitely couldn't imagine him letting us take the Sibyl's jar and shattering it for our summoning ritual. They had found love. Why would they want to die?

Finally, Harpocrates nodded, as if they'd come to an agreement. His face tightening with concentration, he pulled his index finger from his mouth, lifted the jar to his lips, and gave it a gentle kiss. Normally, I would not have been moved by a man caressing a jar, but the gesture was so sad and heartfelt, a lump formed in my throat.

He twisted off the lid.

"Good-bye, Apollo," said the Sibyl's voice, clearer now. "I forgive you. Not because you deserve it. Not for your sake at all. But because I will not go into oblivion carrying hate when I can carry love."

Even if I could've spoken, I wouldn't have known what to say. I was in shock. Her tone asked for no reply, no apology. She didn't need or want anything from me. It was almost as if *I* were the one being erased.

Harpocrates met my gaze. Resentment still smoldered in his eyes, but I could tell he was trying to let it go. The effort seemed even harder for him than keeping his hand from his mouth.

Without meaning to, I asked, *Why are you doing this? How can you just agree to die?*

It was in my interest that he did so, sure. But it made no sense. He had found another soul to *live* for. Besides, too many other people had already sacrificed themselves for my quests.

I understood now, better than I ever had, why dying was sometimes necessary. As a mortal, I had made that choice just a few minutes ago in order to save my friends. But a *god* agreeing to cease his existence, especially when he was free and in love? No. I couldn't comprehend that.

Harpocrates gave me a dry smirk. My confusion, my sense of near panic must have given him what he needed to finally stop being angry at me. Of the two of us, he was the wiser god. He understood something I did not. He certainly wasn't going to give me any answers.

The soundless god sent me one last image: me at an altar, making a sacrifice to the heavens. I interpreted that as an order: *Make this worth it. Don't fail.*

Then he exhaled deeply. We watched, stunned, as he began to crumble, his face cracking, his crown collapsing like a sand-castle turret. His last breath, a silver glimmer of fading life force, swirled into the glass jar to be with the Sibyl. He had just enough time to twist the lid closed before his arms and chest turned to chunks of dust, and then Harpocrates was gone.

Reyna lunged forward, catching the jar before it could hit the floor.

"That was close," she said, which was how I realized the god's silence had been broken.

Everything seemed too loud: my own breathing, the sizzle of severed electrical wires, the creaking of the container's walls in the wind.

Meg still had the skin tone of a legume. She stared at the jar in Reyna's hand as if worried it might explode. "Are they…?"

"I think—" I choked on my words. I dabbed my face and found my cheeks were wet. "I think they're gone. Permanently. Harpocrates's last breath is all that remains in the jar now."

Reyna peered through the glass. "But the Sibyl…?" She turned to face me and almost dropped the jar. "My gods, Apollo. You look terrible."

"A horror show. Yes, I remember."

"No. I mean it's worse now. The infection. When did *that* happen?"

Meg squinted at my face. "Oh, yuck. We gotta get you healed, quick."

I was glad I didn't have a mirror or a phone camera to see how I looked. I could only assume the lines of purple infection had made their way up my neck and were now drawing fun new patterns on my cheeks. I didn't feel any more zombie-ish. My stomach wound didn't throb any worse than before. But that could've simply meant my nervous system was shutting down.

"Help me up, please," I said.

It took both of them to do so. In the process, I put one hand on the floor to brace myself, amid the shattered fasces rods, and got a splinter in my palm. Of course I did.

I wobbled on spongy legs, leaning on Reyna, then on Meg, trying to remember how to stand. I didn't want to look at the glass jar, but I couldn't help it. There was no sign of Harpocrates's silvery life force inside. I had to have faith that his last breath was still there. Either that, or when we tried to do our summoning, I would discover that he had played a terrible final joke on me.

As for the Sibyl, I couldn't sense her presence. I was sure her final grain of sand had slipped away. She had chosen to exit the universe with

Harpocrates—one last shared experience between two unlikely lovers.

On the outside of the jar, the gluey remains of a paper label clung to the glass. I could just make out the faded words SMUCKER'S GRAPE. Tarquin and the emperors had much to answer for.

"How could they…?" Reyna shivered. "Can a god do that? Just…choose to stop existing?"

I wanted to say *Gods can do anything*, but the truth was, I didn't know. The bigger question was, why would a god even want to try?

When Harpocrates had given me that last dry smile, had he been hinting that someday I might understand? Someday, would even the Olympians be forgotten relics, yearning for nonexistence?

I used my nails to pull the splinter from my palm. Blood pooled—regular red human blood. It ran down the groove of my lifeline, which was not a great omen. Good thing I didn't believe in such things….

"We need to get back," Reyna said. "Can you move—?"

"Shh," Meg interrupted, putting a finger to her lips.

I feared she was doing the most inappropriate Harpocrates impersonation ever. Then I realized she was quite serious. My newly sensitive ears picked up on what she was hearing—the faint, distant cries of angry birds. The ravens were returning.

31

O, blood moon rising
Take a rain check on doomsday
I'm stuck in traffic

WE EMERGED FROM THE shipping container just in time to get dive-bombed.

A raven swooped past Reyna and bit a chunk out of her hair.

"OW!" she yelled. "All right, that's it. Hold this."

She shoved the glass jar into my hands, then readied her sword.

A second raven came within range and she slashed it out of the sky. Meg's twin blades whirled, Vitamixing another bird into a black cloud. That left only thirty or forty more bloodthirsty hang gliders of doom swarming the tower.

Anger swelled in me. I decided I was done with the ravens' bitterness. Plenty of folks had valid reasons to hate me: Harpocrates, the Sibyl, Koronis, Daphne…maybe a few dozen others. Okay, maybe a few *hundred* others. But the ravens? They were thriving! They'd grown gigantic! They *loved* their new jobs as flesh-eating killers. Enough with the blame.

I secured the glass jar in my backpack. Then I unslung the bow from my shoulder.

"Scram or die!" I yelled at the birds. "You get one warning!"

The ravens cawed and croaked with derision. One dove at me and got an arrow between the eyes. It spiraled downward, shedding a funnel cloud of feathers.

I picked another target and shot it down. Then a third. And a fourth.

The ravens' caws became cries of alarm. They widened their circle, probably thinking they could get out of range. I proved them wrong. I kept shooting until ten were dead. Then a dozen.

"I brought extra arrows today!" I shouted. "Who wants the next one?"

At last, the birds got the message. With a few parting screeches—probably unprintable comments about my parentage—they broke off their assault and flew north toward Marin County.

"Nice work," Meg told me, retracting her blades.

The best I could manage was a nod and some wheezing. Beads of sweat froze on my forehead. My legs felt like soggy french fries. I didn't see how I could climb back down the ladder, much less race off for a fun-filled evening of god-summoning, combat to the death, and possibly turning into a zombie.

"Oh, gods." Reyna stared in the direction the flock had gone, her fingers absently exploring her scalp where the raven had snapped off a hunk of her hair.

"It'll grow back," I said.

"What? No, not my hair. Look!"

She pointed to the Golden Gate Bridge.

We must have been inside the shipping container much longer than I'd realized. The sun sat low in the western sky. The daytime full moon had risen above Mount Tamalpais. The afternoon heat had burned away all the fog, giving us a perfect view of the white fleet—fifty beautiful yachts in V formation—gliding leisurely past Point Bonita Lighthouse at the edge of the Marin Headlands, making their way toward the bridge. Once past it, they would have smooth sailing into the San Francisco Bay.

My mouth tasted like god dust. "How long do we have?"

Reyna checked her watch. "The *vappae* are taking their time, but even at the rate they're sailing, they'll be in position to fire on the camp by sunset. Maybe two hours?"

Under different circumstances, I might have enjoyed her use of the term *vappae*. It had been a long time since I'd heard someone call their enemies *spoiled wines.* In modern parlance, the closest meaning would've been *scumbags*.

"How long will it take for us to reach camp?" I asked.

"In Friday afternoon traffic?" Reyna calculated. "A little more than two hours."

From one of her gardening-belt pouches, Meg pulled a fistful of seeds. “I guess we’d better hurry, then.”

I was not familiar with *Jack and the Beanstalk.*

It didn’t sound like a proper Greek myth.

When Meg said we’d have to use a *Jack-and-the-Beanstalk* exit, I didn’t have a clue what she meant, even as she scattered handfuls of seeds down the nearest pylon, causing them to explode into bloom until she’d formed a latticework of plant matter all the way to the ground.

“Over you go,” she ordered.

“But—”

“You’re in no shape to climb the ladder,” she said. “This’ll be faster. Like falling. Only with plants.”

I hated that description.

Reyna just shrugged. “What the heck.”

She kicked one leg over the railing and jumped. The plants grabbed her, passing her down the leafy latticework a few feet at a time like a bucket brigade. At first she yelped and flailed her arms, but about halfway to the ground, she shouted up to us, “NOT—THAT—BAD!”

I went next. It was bad. I screamed. I got flipped upside down. I floundered for something to hold on to, but I was completely at the mercy of creepers and ferns. It was like free-falling through a skyscraper-size bag of leaves, if those leaves were still alive and very touchy-feely.

At the bottom, the plants set me down gently on the grass next to Reyna, who looked like she’d been tarred and flowered. Meg landed beside us and immediately crumpled into my arms.

“Lotta plants,” she muttered.

Her eyes rolled up in her head. She began to snore. I guessed she would not be Jacking any more beanstalks today.

Aurum and Argentum bounded over, wagging their tails and yapping. The hundreds of black feathers strewn around the parking lot told me the greyhounds had been having fun with the birds I’d shot out of the sky.

I was in no condition to walk, much less carry Meg, but somehow, dragging her between us, Reyna and I managed to stumble back down the hillside to the truck. I suspected Reyna was using her Bellona-mazing skills to lend me some of her strength, though I doubted she had much left to spare.

When we reached the Chevy, Reyna whistled. Her dogs jumped into the back. We wrestled our unconscious beanstalk master into the middle of the bench seat. I collapsed next to her. Reyna cranked the ignition, and we tore off down the hill.

Our progress was great for about ninety seconds. Then we hit the Castro District and got stuck in Friday traffic funneling toward the highway. It was almost enough to make me wish for another bucket brigade of plants that could toss us back to Oakland.

After our time with Harpocrates, everything seemed obscenely loud: the Chevy's engine, the chatter of passing pedestrians, the thrum of subwoofers from other cars. I cradled my backpack, trying to take comfort in the fact that the glass jar was intact. We had gotten what we came for, though I could hardly believe the Sibyl and Harpocrates were gone.

I would have to process my shock and grief later, assuming I lived. I needed to figure out a way to properly honor their passing. How did one commemorate the death of a god of silence? A moment of silence seemed superfluous. Perhaps a moment of screaming?

First things first: survive tonight's battle. Then I would figure out the screaming.

Reyna must have noticed my worried expression.

"You did good back there," she said. "You stepped up."

Reyna sounded sincere. But her praise just made me feel more ashamed.

"I'm holding the last breath of a god I bullied," I said miserably, "in the jar of a Sibyl I cursed, who was protected by birds I turned into killing machines after they tattled about my cheating girlfriend, who I subsequently had assassinated."

"All true," Reyna said. "But the thing is, you recognize it now."

"It feels horrible."

She gave me a thin smile. "That's kind of the point. You do something evil, you feel bad about it, you do better. That's a sign you might be developing a conscience."

I tried to remember which of the gods had created the human conscience. *Had* we created it, or had humans just developed it on their own? Giving mortals a sense of decency didn't seem like the sort of thing a god would brag about on their profile page.

"I—I appreciate what you're saying," I managed. "But my past mistakes almost got you and Meg killed. If Harpocrates had destroyed you when you

were trying to protect me…”

The idea was too awful to contemplate. My shiny new conscience would have blown up inside me like a grenade.

Reyna gave me a brief pat on the shoulder. “All we did was show Harpocrates how much you’ve changed. He recognized it. Have you completely made up for all the bad things you’ve done? No. But you keep adding to the ‘good things’ column. That’s all any of us can do.”

Adding to the “good things” column. Reyna spoke of this superpower as if it were one I could actually possess.

“Thank you,” I said.

She studied my face with concern, probably noting how far the purple vines of infection had wriggled their way across my cheeks. “You can thank me by staying alive, okay? We need you for that summoning ritual.”

As we climbed the entrance ramp to Interstate 80, I caught glimpses of the bay beyond the downtown skyline. The yachts had now slipped under the Golden Gate Bridge. Apparently, the cutting of Harpocrates’s cords and the destruction of the fasces hadn’t deterred the emperors at all.

Stretching out in front of the big vessels were silver wake lines from dozens of smaller boats making their way toward the East Bay shoreline. Landing parties, I guessed. And those boats were moving a whole lot faster than we were.

Over Mount Tam, the full moon rose, slowly turning the color of Dakota’s Kool-Aid.

Meanwhile, Aurum and Argentum barked cheerfully in the truck bed. Reyna drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and murmured, *“Vamonos. Vamonos.”* Meg leaned against me, snoring and drooling on my shirt. Because she loved me so much.

We were inching our way onto the Bay Bridge when Reyna finally said, “I can’t stand this. The ships shouldn’t have made it past the Golden Gate.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Open the glove compartment, please. Should be a scroll inside.”

I hesitated. Who knew what sort of dangers might lurk in the glove compartment of a praetor’s pickup truck? Cautiously, I rummaged past her insurance documents, a few packages of tissues, some baggies of dog treats….

“This?” I held up a floppy cylinder of vellum.

“Yeah. Unroll it and see if it works.”

“You mean it’s a communication scroll?”

She nodded. “I’d do it myself, but it’s dangerous to drive and scroll.”

“Um, okay.” I spread the vellum across my lap.

Its surface appeared blank. Nothing happened.

I wondered if I was supposed to say some magic words or give it a credit card number or something. Then, above the scroll, a faint ball of light flickered, slowly resolving into a miniature holographic Frank Zhang.

“Whoa!” Tiny Frank nearly jumped out of his tiny armor. “Apollo?”

“Hi,” I said. Then to Reyna, “It works.”

“I see that,” she said. “Frank, can you hear me?”

Frank squinted. We must have looked tiny and fuzzy to him, too. “Is that…? Can barely…Reyna?”

“Yes!” she said. “We’re on our way back. The ships are incoming!”

“I know…. Scout’s report…” Frank’s voice crackled. He seemed to be in some sort of large cave, legionnaires hustling behind him, digging holes and carrying large urns of some kind.

“What are you doing?” Reyna asked. “Where are you?”

“Caldecott…” Frank said. “Just…defensive stuff.”

I wasn’t sure if his voice fuzzed out that time because of static, or if he was being evasive. Judging from his expression, we’d caught him at an awkward moment.

“Any word…Michael?” he asked. (Definitely changing the subject.) “Should’ve…by now.”

“What?” Reyna asked, loud enough to make Meg snort in her sleep. “No, I was going to ask if *you’d* heard anything. They were supposed to stop the yachts at the Golden Gate. Since the ships got through…” Her voice faltered.

There could have been a dozen reasons why Michael Kahale and his commando team had failed to stop the emperors’ yachts. None of them were good, and none of them could change what would happen next. The only things now standing between Camp Jupiter and fiery annihilation were the emperors’ pride, which made them insist on making a ground assault first, and an empty Smucker’s jelly jar that might or might not allow us to summon godly help.

“Just hang on!” Reyna said. “Tell Ella to get things ready for the ritual!”

“Can’t…What?” Frank’s face melted to a smudge of colored light. His voice sounded like gravel shaking in an aluminum can. “I…Hazel…Need to __”

The scroll burst into flames, which was not what my crotch needed at that particular moment.

I swatted the cinders off my pants as Meg woke, yawning and blinking.

"What'd you do?" she demanded.

"Nothing! I didn't know the message would self-destruct!"

"Bad connection," Reyna guessed. "The silence must be breaking up slowly—like, working its way outward from the epicenter at Sutro Tower. We overheated the scroll."

"That's possible." I stomped out the last bits of smoldering vellum. "Hopefully we'll be able to send an Iris-message once we reach camp."

"*If* we reach camp," Reyna grumbled. "This traffic…Oh."

She pointed to a blinking road sign ahead of us: HWY 24E CLOSED AT CALDECOTT TUNL FOR EMERG MAINTENANCE. SEEK ALT ROUTES.

"Emergency maintenance?" said Meg. "You think it's the Mist again, clearing people out?"

"Maybe." Reyna frowned at the lines of cars in front of us. "No wonder everything's backed up. What was Frank doing in the tunnel? We didn't discuss any…" She knit her eyebrows, as if an unpleasant thought had occurred to her. "We have to get back. Fast."

"The emperors will need time to organize their ground assault," I said. "They won't launch their *ballistae* until after they've tried to take the camp intact. Maybe…maybe the traffic will slow them down, too. They'll have to seek alternate routes."

"They're on boats, dummy," said Meg.

She was right. And once the assault forces landed, they'd be marching on foot, not driving. Still, I liked the image of the emperors and their army approaching the Caldecott Tunnel, seeing a bunch of flashing signs and orange cones, and deciding, *Well, darn. We'll have to come back tomorrow.*

"We could ditch the truck," Reyna mused. Then she glanced at us and clearly dismissed the idea. None of us was in any shape to run a half-marathon from the middle of the Bay Bridge to Camp Jupiter.

She muttered a curse. "We need…Ah!"

Just ahead, a maintenance truck was trundling along, a worker on the tailgate picking up cones that had been blocking the left lane for some unknown reason. Typical. Friday at rush hour, with the Caldecott Tunnel shut down, obviously what you wanted to do was close one lane of traffic on the area's busiest bridge. This meant, however, that ahead of the

maintenance truck, there was an empty, extremely illegal-to-drive-in lane that stretched as far as the Lester could see.

"Hold on," Reyna warned. And as soon as we edged past the maintenance truck, she swerved in front of it, plowing down a half dozen cones, and gunned the engine.

The maintenance truck blared its horn and flashed its headlights. Reyna's greyhounds barked and wagged their tails in reply like, *See ya!*

I imagined we would have a few California Highway Patrol vehicles ready to chase us at the bottom of the bridge, but for the time being, we blasted past traffic at speeds that would have been creditable even for my sun chariot.

We reached the Oakland side. Still no sign of pursuit. Reyna veered onto 580, smashing through a line of orange delineator posts and rocketing up the merge ramp for Highway 24. She politely ignored the guys in hard hats who waved their orange DANGER signs and screamed things at us.

We had found our alternate route. It was the regular route we weren't supposed to take.

I glanced behind us. No cops yet. Out in the water, the emperors' yachts had passed Treasure Island and were leisurely taking up positions, forming a necklace of billion-dollar luxury death machines across the bay. I saw no trace of the smaller landing craft, which meant they must have reached the shore. That wasn't good.

On the bright side, we were making great time. We soared along the overpass all by ourselves, our destination only a few miles away.

"We're going to make it," I said, like a fool.

Once again, I had broken the First Law of Percy Jackson: Never say something is going to work out, because as soon as you do, it won't.

KALUMP!

Above our heads, foot-shaped indentations appeared in the truck's ceiling. The vehicle lurched under the extra weight. It was déjà ghoul all over again.

Aurum and Argentum barked wildly.

"Eurynomos!" Meg yelled.

"Where do they *come* from?" I complained. "Do they just hang around on highway signs all day, waiting to drop?"

Claws punctured the metal and upholstery. I knew what would happen next: skylight installation.

Reyna shouted, “Apollo, take the wheel! Meg, gas pedal!”

For a heartbeat, I thought she meant that as some kind of prayer. In moments of personal crisis, my followers often used to implore me: *Apollo, take the wheel*, hoping I would guide them through their problems. Most of the time, though, they didn’t mean it *literally*, nor was I physically sitting in the passenger’s seat, nor did they add anything about Meg and gas pedals.

Reyna didn’t wait for me to figure it out. She released her grip and reached behind her seat, groping for a weapon. I lunged across and grabbed the wheel. Meg put her foot on the accelerator.

Quarters were much too close for Reyna to use her sword, but that didn’t bother her. Reyna had daggers. She unsheathed one, glared at the roof bending and breaking above us, and muttered, “Nobody messes with my truck.”

A lot happened in the next two seconds.

The roof ripped open, revealing the familiar, disgusting sight of a fly-colored eurynomos, its white eyes bulging, its fangs dripping with saliva, its vulture-feather loincloth fluttering in the wind.

The smell of rancid meat wafted into the cab, making my stomach turn. All the zombie poison in my system seemed to ignite at once.

The eurynomos screamed, “FOOOOOOO—”

Its battle cry was cut short, however, when Reyna launched herself upward and impaled her dagger straight up its vulture diaper.

She had apparently been studying the weak spots of the ghouls. She had found one. The eurynomos toppled off the truck, which would have been wonderful, except that I, too, felt like I had been stabbed in the diaper.

I said, “Glurg.”

My hand slipped off the wheel. Meg hit the accelerator in alarm. With Reyna still half out of the cab, her greyhounds howling furiously, our Chevy veered across the ramp and crashed straight through the guardrail. Lucky me. Once again, I went flying off an East Bay highway in a car that couldn’t fly.

32

We have a special
Today on slightly used trucks
Thanks, Target shoppers

MY SON ASCLEPIUS ONCE explained the purpose of physical shock to me.

He said it's a safety mechanism for coping with trauma. When the human brain experiences something too violent and frightening to process, it just stops recording. Minutes, hours, even days can be a complete blank in the victim's memory.

Perhaps this explained why I had no recollection of the Chevy crashing. After hurtling through the guardrail, the next thing I remembered was stumbling around the parking lot of a Target store, pushing a three-wheeled shopping cart filled with Meg. I was muttering the lyrics to "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay." Meg, semiconscious, was listlessly waving one hand, trying to conduct.

My cart bumped into a steaming crumpled heap of metal—a red Chevy Silverado with its tires popped, its windshield broken, and its air bags deployed. Some inconsiderate driver had plummeted from the heavens and landed right on top of the cart return, smashing a dozen shopping carts beneath the weight of the pickup.

Who would do such a thing?

Wait…

I heard growling. A few car-lengths away, two metal greyhounds stood protectively over their wounded master, keeping a small crowd of spectators

at bay. A young woman in maroon and gold (Right, I remembered her! She liked to laugh at me!) was propped on her elbows, grimacing mightily, her left leg bent at an unnatural angle. Her face was the same color as the asphalt.

"Reyna!" I wedged Meg's shopping cart against the truck and ran to help the praetor. Aurum and Argentum let me through.

"Oh. Oh. Oh." I couldn't seem to say anything else. I should've known what to do. I was a healer. But that break in the leg—yikes.

"I'm alive," Reyna said through gritted teeth. "Meg?"

"She's conducting," I said.

One of the Target shoppers inched forward, braving the fury of the dogs. "I called nine-one-one. Is there anything else I can do?"

"She'll be fine!" I yelped. "Thank you! I—I'm a doctor?"

The mortal woman blinked. "Are you asking me?"

"No. I'm a doctor!"

"Hey," said a second shopper. "Your other friend is rolling away."

"ACK!" I ran after Meg, who was muttering "*Whee*" as she picked up steam in her red plastic cart. I grabbed the handles and navigated her back to Reyna's side.

The praetor tried to move but choked on the pain. "I might…black out."

"No, no, no." *Think, Apollo, think.* Should I wait for the mortal paramedics, who knew nothing of ambrosia and nectar? Should I check for more first-aid supplies in Meg's gardening belt?

A familiar voice from across the parking lot yelled, "Thank you, everybody! We'll take it from here!"

Lavinia Asimov jogged toward us, a dozen naiads and fauns in her wake, many of whom I recognized from People's Park. Most were dressed in camouflage, covered with vines and branches like they had just arrived via beanstalk. Lavinia wore pink camo pants and a green tank top, her manubalista clanking against her shoulder. With her spiky pink hair and pink eyebrows, her jaw working furiously on a wad of bubblegum, she just radiated *authority figure*.

"This is now an active investigation scene!" she announced to the mortals. "Thank you, Target shoppers. Please move along!"

Either the tone of her voice or the barking of the greyhounds finally convinced the onlookers to disperse. Nevertheless, sirens were blaring in the distance. Soon we'd be surrounded by paramedics, or the highway patrol, or

both. Mortals weren't nearly as used to vehicles hurtling off highway overpasses as I was.

I stared at our pink-haired friend. "Lavinia, what are you *doing* here?"

"Secret mission," she announced.

"That's *cacaseca*," Reyna grumbled. "You *left* your post. You're in *so* much trouble."

Lavinia's nature-spirit friends looked jumpy, like they were on the verge of scattering, but their pink-frosted leader calmed them with a glance. Reyna's greyhounds didn't snarl or attack, which I guessed meant they'd detected no lies from Lavinia.

"All due respect, Praetor," she said, "but it looks like you're in more trouble than I am at the moment. Harold, Felipe—stabilize her leg and let's get her out of this parking lot before more mortals arrive. Reginald, push Meg's cart. Lotoya, retrieve whatever supplies they have in the truck, please. I'll help Apollo. We make for those woods. Now!"

Lavinia's definition of *woods* was generous. I would've called it a gulley where shopping carts went to die. Still, her People's Park platoon worked with surprising efficiency. In a matter of minutes, they had us all safely hidden in the ditch among the broken carts and trash-festooned trees, just as emergency vehicles came wailing into the parking lot.

Harold and Felipe splinted Reyna's leg—which only caused her to scream and throw up a little. Two other fauns constructed a stretcher for her out of branches and old clothing while Aurum and Argentum tried to help by bringing them sticks…or perhaps they just wanted to play fetch. Reginald extricated Meg from her shopping cart and revived her with hand-fed bits of ambrosia.

A couple of dryads checked me for injuries—meaning even *more* injuries than I'd had before—but there wasn't much they could do. They didn't like the look of my zombie-infected face, or the way the undead infection made me smell. Unfortunately, my condition was beyond any nature-spirit healing.

As they moved off, one muttered to her friend, "Once it gets fully dark…"

"I know," said her friend. "With a blood moon tonight? Poor guy…"

I decided to ignore them. It seemed the best way to avoid bursting into tears.

Lotoya—who must have been a redwood dryad, judging from her burgundy complexion and impressive size—crouched next to me and deposited all the supplies she'd retrieved from the truck. I grabbed frantically—not for my bow and quiver, or even for my ukulele, but for my backpack. I almost fainted with relief when I found the Smucker's jar inside, still intact.

"Thank you," I told her.

She nodded somberly. "A good jelly jar is hard to find."

Reyna struggled to sit up among the fauns fussing over her. "We're wasting time. We have to get back to camp!"

Lavinia arched her pink eyebrows. "You're not going anywhere with that leg, Praetor. Even if you could, you wouldn't be much help. We can heal you faster if you just relax—"

"Relax? The legion *needs* me! It needs you too, Lavinia! How could you desert?"

"Okay, first, I *didn't* desert. You don't know all the facts."

"You left camp without leave. You—" Reyna leaned forward too fast and gasped in agony. The fauns took her shoulders. They helped her to sit back, easing her onto the new stretcher with its lovely padding of moss, trash, and old tie-dyed T-shirts.

"You left your comrades," Reyna croaked. "Your friends."

"I'm right here," Lavinia said. "I'm going to ask Felipe to lull you to sleep now so you can rest and heal."

"No! You…you can't run away."

Lavinia snorted. "Who said anything about running away? Remember, Reyna, this was *your* backup plan. Plan L for *Lavinia*! When we all get back to camp, you're going to thank me. You'll tell everybody this was your idea."

"What? I would never…I didn't give you any such…This is mutiny!"

I glanced at the greyhounds, waiting for them to rise to their master's defense and tear Lavinia apart. Strangely, they just kept circling Reyna, occasionally licking her face or sniffing her broken leg. They seemed concerned about her condition, but not at all about Lavinia's rebellious lies.

"Lavinia," Reyna pleaded, "I'll have to bring you up on desertion charges. Don't do this. Don't make me—"

"Now, Felipe," Lavinia ordered.

The faun raised his panpipes and played a lullaby, soft and low, right next to Reyna's head.

"Can't!" Reyna struggled to keep her eyes open. "Won't. Ahhggghh."

She went limp and began to snore.

"That's better." Lavinia turned to me. "Don't worry, I'll leave her someplace safe with a couple of fauns, and of course Aurum and Argentum. She'll be taken care of while she heals. You and Meg, do what you need to do."

Her confident stance and her take-charge tone made her almost unrecognizable as the gawky, nervous legionnaire we'd met at Lake Temescal. She reminded me more of Reyna now, and of Meg. Mostly, though, she seemed like a stronger version of herself—a Lavinia who had decided what she needed to do and would not rest until she did it.

"Where are you going?" I asked, still utterly confused. "Why won't you come back to camp with us?"

Meg stumbled over, ambrosia crumbles stuck around her mouth. "Don't pester her," she told me. Then to Lavinia: "Is Peaches…?"

Lavinia shook her head. "He and Don are with the advance group, making contact with the Nereids."

Meg pouted. "Yeah. Okay. The emperors' ground forces?"

Lavinia's expression turned somber. "They already passed by. We hid and watched. Yeah…It's not good. I'm sure they'll be in combat with the legion by the time you get there. You remember the path I told you about?"

"Yeah," Meg agreed. "Okay, good luck."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I tried to make a time-out sign, though my uncoordinated hands made it look more like a tent. "What are you talking about? What path? Why would you come out here just to hide as the enemy army passes by? Why are Peaches and Don talking to…Wait. Nereids?"

Nereids are spirits of the sea. The nearest ones would be…Oh.

I couldn't see much from our trash-filled gulley. I definitely couldn't see the San Francisco Bay, or the string of yachts taking up position to fire on the camp. But I knew we were close.

I looked at Lavinia with newfound respect. Or disrespect. Which is it when you realize that someone you knew was crazy is actually even crazier than you suspected?

"Lavinia, you are *not* planning—"

“Stop right there,” she warned, “or I’ll have Felipe put you down for a nap, too.”

“But Michael Kahale—”

“Yeah, we know. He failed. The emperors’ troops were bragging about it as they marched past. It’s one more thing they have to pay for.”

Brave words, but her eyes betrayed a flicker of worry, telling me she was more terrified than she let on. She was having trouble keeping up her own courage and preventing her makeshift troops from losing their nerve. She did *not* need me reminding her how insane her plan was.

“We’ve all got a lot to do,” she said. “Good luck.” She ruffled Meg’s hair, which did not need any more ruffling. “Dryads and fauns, let’s move!”

Harold and Felipe picked up Reyna’s makeshift stretcher and jogged off down the gully, Aurum and Argentum bounding around them like, *Oh, boy, another hike!* Lavinia and the others followed. Soon they were lost in the underbrush, vanishing into the terrain as only nature spirits and girls with bright pink hair can do.

Meg studied my face. “You whole?”

I almost wanted to laugh. Where had she picked up *that* expression? I had zombie poison coursing through my body and up into my face. The dryads thought I would turn into a shambling undead minion of Tarquin as soon as it got fully dark. I was shaking from exhaustion and fear. We apparently had an enemy army between us and camp, and Lavinia was leading a suicide attack on the imperial fleet with inexperienced nature spirits, when an *actual* elite commando force had already failed.

When had I last felt “whole”? I wanted to believe it was back when I was a god, but that wasn’t true. I hadn’t been completely myself for centuries. Maybe millennia.

At the moment, I felt more like a *hole*—a void in the cosmos through which Harpocrates, the Sibyl, and a lot of people I cared about had vanished.

“I’ll manage,” I said.

“Good, because look.” Meg pointed toward the Oakland Hills. I thought I was seeing fog, but fog didn’t rise vertically from hillsides. Close to the perimeter of Camp Jupiter, fires were burning.

“We need wheels,” said Meg.

33

Welcome to the war
We hope you enjoy your death
Please come again soon!

OKAY, BUT WHY DID it have to be *bicycles*?

I understood that cars were a deal-breaker. We had crashed enough vehicles for one week. I understood that jogging to camp was out of the question, given the fact that we could barely stand.

But why didn't demigods have some sort of ride-share app for summoning giant eagles? I decided I would create one as soon as I became a god again. Right after I figured out a way to let demigods use smartphones safely.

Across the street from Target stood a rack of canary-yellow Go-Glo bikes. Meg inserted a credit card into the kiosk (where she got the card, I had no idea), freed two cycles from the rack, and offered one to me.

Joy and happiness. Now we could pedal into battle like the neon-yellow warriors of old.

We took the side streets and sidewalks, using the columns of smoke in the hills to guide our way. With Highway 24 closed, traffic was snarled everywhere, angry drivers honking and yelling and threatening violence. I was tempted to tell them that if they really wanted a fight, they could just follow us. We could use a few thousand angry commuters on our side.

As we passed the Rockridge BART station, we spotted the first enemy troops. Pandai patrolled the elevated platform, with furry black ears folded around themselves like firefighter turnout coats, and flat-head axes in their

hands. Fire trucks were parked along College Avenue, their lights strobing in the underpass. More faux-firefighter pandai guarded the station doors, turning away mortals. I hoped the real firefighters were okay, because firefighters are important and also because they are hot, and no, that wasn't relevant right then.

"This way!" Meg veered up the steepest hill she could find, just to annoy me. I was forced to stand as I pedaled, pushing with all my weight to make progress against the incline.

At the summit, more bad news.

In front of us, arrayed across the higher hills, troops marched doggedly toward Camp Jupiter. There were squads of blemmyae, pandai, and even some six-armed Earthborn who had served Gaea in the Recent Unpleasantness, all fighting their way through flaming trenches, staked barricades, and Roman skirmishers trying to put my archery lessons to good use. In the early evening gloom, I could only see bits and pieces of the battle. Judging from the mass of glittering armor and the forest of battle pennants, the main part of the emperors' army was concentrated on Highway 24, forcing its way toward the Caldecott Tunnel. Enemy catapults hurled projectiles toward the legion's positions, but most disappeared in bursts of purple light as soon as they got close. I assumed that was the work of Terminus, doing his part to defend the camp's borders.

Meanwhile, at the base of the tunnel, flashes of lightning pinpointed the location of the legion's standard. Tendrils of electricity zigzagged down the hillsides, arcing through enemy lines and frying them to dust. Camp Jupiter's ballistae launched giant flaming spears at the invaders, raking through their lines and starting more forest fires. The emperors' troops kept coming.

The ones making the best progress were huddled behind large armored vehicles that crawled on eight legs and…Oh, gods. My guts felt like they'd gotten tangled in my bike chain. Those weren't vehicles.

"Myrmekes," I said. "Meg, those are myr—"

"I see them." She didn't even slow down. "It doesn't change anything. Come on!"

How could it *not* change anything? We'd faced a nest of those giant ants at Camp Half-Blood and barely survived. Meg had nearly been pulped into Gerber's larvae purée.

Now we were confronting myrmekes trained for war, snapping trees in half with their pincers and spraying acid to melt through the camp's

defensive pickets.

This was a brand-new flavor of horrible.

“We’ll never get through their lines!” I protested.

“Lavinia’s secret tunnel.”

“It collapsed!”

“Not *that* tunnel. A different secret tunnel.”

“How many does she *have*?”

“Dunno. A lot? C’mon.”

With that rousing oratory complete, Meg pedaled onward. I followed, having nothing better to do.

She led me up a dead-end street to a generator station at the base of an electrical tower. The area was ringed in barbed-wire fencing, but the gate stood wide open. If Meg had told me to climb the tower, I would have given up and made my peace with zombie eternity. Instead, she pointed to the side of the generator, where metal doors were set into the concrete like the entrance to a storm cellar or a bomb shelter.

“Hold my bike,” she said.

She jumped off and summoned one of her swords. With a single strike, she slashed through the padlocked chains, then pulled open the doors, revealing a dark shaft slanting downward at a precarious angle.

“Perfect,” she said. “It’s big enough to ride through.”

“What?”

She hopped back on her Go-Glo and plunged into the tunnel, the *click, click, click* of her bike chain echoing off the concrete walls.

“You have a very *broad* definition of perfect,” I muttered. Then I coasted in after her.

Much to my surprise, in the total darkness of the tunnel, the Go-Glo bike actually, well, *glowed*. I suppose I should have expected that. Ahead of me, I could see the faint, fuzzy apparition of Meg’s neon war machine. When I looked down, the yellow aura of my own bike was almost blinding. It did little to help me navigate down the steep shaft, but it would make me a much easier target for enemies to pick out in the gloom. Hooray!

Against all odds, I did not wipe out and break my neck. The tunnel leveled, then began to climb again. I wondered who had excavated this passageway and why they hadn’t installed a convenient lift system so I didn’t have to expend so much energy pedaling.

Somewhere overhead, an explosion shook the tunnel, which was excellent motivation to keep moving. After a bit more sweating and gasping, I realized I could discern a dim square of light ahead of us—an exit covered in branches.

Meg burst straight through it. I wobbled after her, emerging in a landscape lit by fire and lightning and ringing with the sounds of chaos.

We had arrived in the middle of the war zone.

I will give you free advice.

If you plan to pop into a battle, the place you do *not* want to be is in the middle of it. I recommend the very back, where the general often has a comfortable tent with hors d'oeuvres and beverages.

But the middle? No. *Always* bad, especially if you arrive on canary-yellow glow-in-the-dark bikes.

As soon as Meg and I emerged, we were spotted by a dozen large humanoids covered in shaggy blond hair. They pointed at us and began to scream.

Khromandae. Wow. I hadn't seen any of their kind since Dionysus's drunken invasion of India back in the BCE. Their species has gorgeous gray eyes, but that's about the only flattering thing I can say about them. Their dirty, shaggy blond pelts make them look like Muppets who have been used as dust rags. Their doglike teeth clearly never get a proper flossing. They are strong, aggressive, and can only communicate in earsplitting shrieks. I once asked Ares and Aphrodite if the Khromandae were their secret love children from their longstanding affair, because they were such a perfect mix of the two Olympians. Ares and Aphrodite did not find that funny.

Meg, like any reasonable child when confronted with a dozen hairy giants, hopped off her bike, summoned her swords, and charged. I yelped in alarm and drew my bow. I was low on arrows after playing catch with the ravens, but I managed to slay six of the Khromandae before Meg reached them. Despite how exhausted she must've been, she handily dispatched the remaining six with a blur of her golden blades.

I laughed—actually *laughed*—with satisfaction. It felt so good to be a decent archer again, and to watch Meg at her swordplay. What a team we made!

That's one of the dangers of being in a battle. (Along with getting killed.) When things are going well, you tend to get tunnel vision. You zero in on

your little area and forget the big picture. As Meg gave the last Khromanda a haircut straight through the chest, I allowed myself to think that we were winning!

Then I scanned our surroundings, and I realized we were surrounded by a whole lot of *not winning*. Gargantuan ants trampled their way toward us, spewing acid to clear the hillside of skirmishers. Several steaming bodies in Roman armor sprawled in the underbrush, and I did not want to think about who they might have been or how they had died.

Pandai in black Kevlar and helmets, almost invisible in the dusk, glided around on their huge parasail ears, dropping onto any unsuspecting demigod they could find. Higher up, giant eagles fought with giant ravens, their wingtips glinting in the bloodred moonlight. Just a hundred yards to my left, wolf-headed cynocephali howled as they bounded into battle, crashing into the shields of the nearest cohort (the Third?), which looked small and alone and critically undermanned in a sea of bad guys.

That was only on *our* hill. I could see fires burning across the whole western front along the valley's borders—maybe half a mile of patchwork battles. Ballistae launched glowing spears from the summits. Catapults hurled boulders that shattered on impact, spraying shards of Imperial gold into the enemy lines. Flaming logs—always a fun Roman party game—rolled down the hillsides, smashing through packs of Earthborn.

For all the legion's efforts, the enemy kept advancing. On the empty eastbound lanes of Highway 24, the emperors' main columns marched toward the Caldecott Tunnel, their gold-and-purple banners raised high. Roman colors. Roman emperors bent on destroying the last true Roman legion. This was how it ended, I thought bitterly. Not fighting threats from the outside, but fighting against the ugliest side of our own history.

"TESTUDO!" A centurion's shout brought my attention back to the Third Cohort. They were struggling to form a protective turtle formation with their shields as the cynocephali swarmed over them in a snarling wave of fur and claws.

"Meg!" I yelled, pointing to the imperiled cohort.

She ran toward them, me at her heels. As we closed in, I scooped up an abandoned quiver from the ground, trying not to think about why it had been dropped there, and sent a fresh volley of arrows into the pack. Six fell dead. Seven. Eight. But there were still too many. Meg screamed in fury and launched herself at the nearest wolf-headed men. She was quickly

surrounded, but our advance had distracted the pack, giving the Third Cohort a few precious seconds to regroup.

"OFFENSE ROMULUS!" shouted the centurion.

If you have ever seen a pill bug uncurl, revealing its hundreds of legs, you can imagine what the Third Cohort looked like as it broke testudo and formed a bristling forest of spears, skewering the cynocephali.

I was so impressed I almost got my face chewed off by a stray charging wolf-man. Just before it reached me, Centurion Larry hurled his javelin. The monster fell at my feet, impaled in the middle of his incredibly un-manscaped back.

"You made it!" Larry grinned at us. "Where's Reyna?"

"She's okay," I said. "Er, she's alive."

"Cool! Frank wants to see you, ASAP!"

Meg stumbled to my side, breathing hard, her swords glistening with monster goo. "Hey, Larry. How's it going?"

"Terrible!" Larry sounded delighted. "Carl, Reza—escort these two to Praetor Zhang immediately."

"YESSIR!" Our escorts hustled us off toward the Caldecott Tunnel, while behind us, Larry called his troops back to action: "Come on, legionnaires! We've drilled for this. We've got this!"

After a few more terrible minutes of dodging pandai, jumping fiery craters, and skirting mobs of monsters, Carl and Reza brought us safely to Frank Zhang's command post at the mouth of the Caldecott Tunnel. Much to my disappointment, there were no hors d'oeuvres or beverages. There wasn't even a tent—just a bunch of stressed-out Romans in full battle gear, rushing around carrying orders and shoring up defenses. Above us, on the concrete terrace that stretched over the tunnel's mouth, Jacob the standard-bearer stood with the legion's eagle and a couple of spotters, keeping watch on all the approaches. Whenever an enemy got too close, Jacob would zap them like the Oprah Winfrey version of Jupiter: *And YOU get a lightning bolt! And YOU get a lightning bolt!* Unfortunately, he'd been using the eagle so much that it was beginning to smoke. Even superpowerful magic items have their limits. The legion's standard was close to total overload.

When Frank Zhang saw us, a whole *g* of weight seemed to lift from his shoulders. "Thank the gods! Apollo, your face looks terrible. Where's Reyna?"

“Long story.” I was about to launch into the short version of that long story when Hazel Levesque materialized on a horse right next to me, which was an excellent way of testing whether my heart still worked properly.

“What’s going on?” Hazel asked. “Apollo, your face—”

“I know.” I sighed.

Her immortal steed, the lightning-fast Arion, gave me the side-eye and nickered as if to say, *This fool ain’t no Apollo.*

“Good to see you too, cuz,” I grumbled.

I told them all in brief what had happened, with Meg occasionally adding helpful comments like “He was stupid,” and “He was more stupid,” and “He did good; then he got stupid again.”

When Hazel heard about our encounter in the Target parking lot, she gritted her teeth. “Lavinia. That girl, I swear. If anything happens to Reyna —”

“Let’s focus on what we can control,” Frank said, though he looked shaken that Reyna wouldn’t be coming back to help. “Apollo, we’ll buy you as much time as possible for your summoning. Terminus is doing what he can to slow the emperors down. Right now, I’ve got ballistae and catapults targeting the myrmekes. If we can’t bring them down, we’ll never stop the advance.”

Hazel grimaced. “The First through Fourth Cohorts are spread pretty thin across these hills. Arion and I have been zipping back and forth between them as needed, but…” She stopped herself from stating the obvious: *We’re losing ground.* “Frank, if you can spare me for a minute, I’ll get Apollo and Meg to Temple Hill. Ella and Tyson are waiting.”

“Go.”

“Wait,” I said—not that I wasn’t super anxious to summon a god with a jelly jar, but something Hazel said had made me uneasy. “If the First through Fourth Cohorts are here, where’s the Fifth?”

“Guarding New Rome,” said Hazel. “Dakota’s with them. At the moment, thank the gods, the city is secure. No sign of Tarquin.”

POP. Right next to me appeared a marble bust of Terminus, dressed in a World War I British Army cap and khaki greatcoat that covered him to the foot of his pedestal. With his loose sleeves, he might have been a double amputee from the trenches of the Somme. Unfortunately, I’d met more than a few of those in the Great War.

“The city is *not* secure!” he announced. “Tarquin is attacking!”

“What?” Hazel looked personally offended. “From where?”

“Underneath!”

“The sewers.” Hazel cursed. “But how—?”

“Tarquin built the original *cloaca maxima* of Rome,” I reminded her. “He knows sewers.”

“I remembered that! I sealed the exits myself!”

“Well, somehow he unsealed them!” Terminus said. “The Fifth Cohort needs help. Immediately!”

Hazel wavered, clearly rattled by Tarquin outfoxing her.

“Go,” Frank told her. “I’ll send the Fourth Cohort to reinforce you.”

Hazel laughed nervously. “And leave you here with only three? No.”

“It’s fine,” Frank said. “Terminus, can you open our defensive barriers here at the main gate?”

“Why would I do that?”

“We’ll try the Wakanda thing.”

“The what?”

“You know,” Frank said. “We’ll funnel the enemy into one location.”

Terminus glowered. “I do not recall any ‘Wakanda thing’ in the Roman military manuals. But very well.”

Hazel frowned. “Frank, you’re not going to do anything stupid—”

“We’ll concentrate our people here and hold the tunnel. I can do this.” He mustered another confident smile. “Good luck, guys. See you on the other side!”

Or not, I thought.

Frank didn’t wait for more protests. He marched off, shouting orders to form up the troops and send the Fourth Cohort into New Rome. I remembered the hazy images I’d seen from the holographic scroll—Frank ordering his workers around in the Caldecott Tunnel, digging and toting urns. I recalled Ella’s cryptic words about bridges and fires…. I didn’t like where those thoughts led me.

“Saddle up, kids,” Hazel said, offering me a hand.

Arion whinnied indignantly.

“Yes, I know,” Hazel said. “You don’t like carrying three. We’ll just drop off these two at Temple Hill and then head straight for the city. There’ll be plenty of undead for you to trample, I promise.”

That seemed to mollify the horse.

I climbed on behind Hazel. Meg took the rumble seat on the horse’s rear.

I barely had time to hug Hazel’s waist before Arion zoomed off, leaving my stomach on the Oakland side of the hills.

34

O insert name here
Please hear us and fill in blank
What is this, Mad Libs?

TYSON AND ELLA WERE not good at waiting.

We found them at the steps of Jupiter's temple, Ella pacing and wringing her hands, Tyson bouncing up and down in excitement like a boxer ready for round one.

The heavy burlap bags hanging from a belt around Ella's waist swung and clunked together, reminding me of Hephaestus's office desk toy—the one with the ball bearings that bounced against each other. (I hated visiting Hephaestus's office. His desk toys were so mesmerizing I found myself staring at them for hours, sometimes decades. I missed the entire 1480s that way.)

Tyson's bare chest was now completely covered with tattooed lines of prophecy. When he saw us, he broke into a grin.

"Yay!" he exclaimed. "Zoom Pony!"

I was not surprised Tyson had dubbed Arion "Zoom Pony," or that he seemed happier to see the horse than me. I *was* surprised that Arion, despite some resentful snorting, allowed the Cyclops to pet his snout. Arion had never struck me as the cuddly type. Then, again, Tyson and Arion were both related through Poseidon, which made them brothers of a sort, and…You know what? I'm going to stop thinking about this before my brain melts.

Ella scuttled over. "Late. Very late. Come on, Apollo. You're late."

I bit back the urge to tell her that we'd had a few things going on. I climbed off Arion's back and waited for Meg, but she stayed on with Hazel.

"You don't need me for the summoning thing," Meg said. "I'm gonna help Hazel and unleash the unicorns."

"But—"

"Gods' speed," Hazel told me.

Arion vanished, leaving a trail of smoke down the hillside and Tyson patting empty air.

"Aww." The Cyclops pouted. "Zoom Pony left."

"Yes, he does that." I tried to convince myself Meg would be fine. I'd see her soon. The last words I ever heard from her would not be *unleash the unicorns*. "Now, if we're ready—?"

"Late. Later than ready," Ella complained. "Pick a temple. Yes. Need to pick."

"I need to—"

"Single-god summoning!" Tyson did his best to roll up his pants leg while hopping over to me on one foot. "Here, I will show you again. It is on my thigh."

"That's okay!" I told him. "I remember. It's just…"

I scanned the hill. So many temples and shrines—even more now that the legion had completed its Jason-inspired building spree. So many statues of gods staring at me.

As a member of a pantheon, I had an aversion to picking only one god. That was like picking your favorite child or your favorite musician. If you were *capable* of picking only one, you were doing something wrong.

Also, picking one god meant all the other gods would be mad at me. It didn't matter if they wouldn't have wanted to help me or would've laughed in my face if I'd asked. They would still be offended that I hadn't put them at the top of my list. I knew how they thought. I used to be one of them.

Sure, there were some obvious *no*s. I would not be summoning Juno. I would not bother with Venus, especially since Friday night was her spa night with the Three Graces. Somnus was a nonstarter. He'd answer my call, promise to be right over, and then fall asleep again.

I gazed at the giant statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, his purple toga rippling like a matador's cape.

C'mon, he seemed to be telling me. *You know you want to.*

The most powerful of the Olympians. It was well within his power to smite the emperors' armies, heal my zombie wound, and set everything right at Camp Jupiter (which, after all, was named in his honor). He might even notice all the heroic things I'd done, decide I'd suffered enough, and free me from the punishment of my mortal form.

Then again…he might not. Could be he was *expecting* me to call on him for help. Once I did, he might make the heavens rumble with his laughter and a deep, divine *Nope!*

To my surprise, I realized I did not want my godhood back *that* badly. I didn't even want to *live* that badly. If Jupiter expected me to crawl to him for help, begging for mercy, he could stick his lightning bolt right up his cloaca maxima.

There had only ever been one choice. Deep down, I'd always known which god I had to call.

"Follow me," I told Ella and Tyson.

I ran for the temple of Diana.

Now, I'll admit I've never been a huge fan of Artemis's Roman persona. As I've said before, I never felt like I personally changed that much during Roman times. I just stayed Apollo. Artemis, though…

You know how it is when your sister goes through her moody teenage years? She changes her name to Diana, cuts her hair, hangs out with a different, more hostile set of maiden hunters, starts associating with Hecate and the moon, and basically acts weird? When we first relocated to Rome, the two of us were worshipped together like in the old days—twin gods with our own temple—but soon Diana went off and did her own thing. We just didn't talk like we used to when we were young and Greek, you know?

I was apprehensive about summoning her Roman incarnation, but I needed help, and Artemis—sorry, *Diana*—was the most likely to respond, even if she would never let me hear the end of it afterward. Besides, I missed her terribly. Yes, I said it. If I was going to die tonight, which seemed increasingly likely, first I wanted to see my sister one last time.

Her temple was an outdoor garden, as one might expect from a goddess of the wild. Inside a ring of mature oak trees gleamed a silver pool with a single perpetual geyser burbling in the center. I imagined the place was meant to evoke Diana's old oak-grove sanctuary at Lake Nemi, one of the first places where the Romans had worshipped her. At the edge of the pool stood a fire pit stacked with wood, ready for lighting. I wondered if the

legion kept every shrine and temple in such good maintenance, just in case someone got a craving for a last-minute middle-of-the-night burnt offering.

"Apollo should light the fire," Ella said. "I will mix ingredients."

"I will dance!" Tyson announced.

I didn't know whether that was part of the ritual or if he just felt like it, but when a tattooed Cyclops decides to launch into an interpretive dance routine, it's best not to ask questions.

Ella rummaged in her supply pouches, pulling out herbs, spices, and vials of oils, which made me realize how long it had been since I'd eaten. Why wasn't my stomach growling? I glanced at the blood moon rising over the hilltops. I hoped my next meal would not be braaaaaains.

I looked around for a torch or a box of matches. Nothing. Then I thought: *Of course not.* I could have the wood pre-stacked for me, but Diana, always the wilderness expert, would expect me to create my own fire.

I unslung my bow and pulled out an arrow. I gathered the lightest, driest kindling into a small pile. It had been a long time since I'd made a fire the old mortal way—spinning an arrow in a bowstring to create friction—but I gave it a go. I fumbled half a dozen times, nearly putting my eye out. My archery student Jacob would've been proud.

I tried to ignore the sound of explosions in the distance. I spun the arrow until my gut wound felt like it was opening up. My hands became slick with popped blisters. The god of the sun struggling to make fire…The ironies would never cease.

Finally, I succeeded in creating the tiniest of flames. After some desperate cupping, puffing, and praying, the fire was lit.

I stood, trembling from exhaustion. Tyson kept dancing to his own internal music, flinging out his arms and spinning like a three-hundred-pound, heavily tattooed Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music* remake Quentin Tarantino always wanted to do. (I convinced him it was a bad idea. You can thank me later.)

Ella began sprinkling her proprietary blend of oils, spices, and herbs into the pit. The smoke smelled like a Mediterranean summer feast. It filled me with a sense of peace—reminding me of happier times when we gods were adored by millions of worshippers. You never appreciate a simple pleasure like that until it is taken away.

The valley turned quiet, as if I'd stepped back into Harpocrates's sphere of silence. Perhaps it was just a lull in the fighting, but I felt as if all of Camp

Jupiter were holding its breath, waiting for me to complete the ritual. With trembling hands, I pulled the Sibyl's glass jar from my backpack.

"What now?" I asked Ella.

"Tyson," Ella said, waving him over, "that was good dancing. Now show Apollo your armpit."

Tyson lumbered over, grinning and sweaty. He lifted his left arm much closer to my face than I would have liked. "See?"

"Oh, gods." I recoiled. "Ella, why would you write the summoning ritual in his *armpit*?"

"That's where it goes," she said.

"It *really* tickled!" Tyson laughed.

"I—I will begin." I tried to focus on the words and not the hairy armpit that they encircled. I tried not to breathe any more than necessary. I will say this, however: Tyson had excellent personal hygiene. Whenever I was forced to inhale, I did not pass out from his body odor, despite his exuberant sweaty dancing. The only smell I detected was a hint of peanut butter. Why? I did not want to know.

"O protector of Rome!" I read aloud. "O insert name here!"

"Uh," Ella said, "that's where you—"

"I will start again. O protector of Rome! O Diana, goddess of the hunt! Hear our plea and accept our offering!"

I do not remember all the lines. If I did, I would not record them here for just anyone to use. Summoning Diana with burnt offerings is the very definition of *Do Not Try This at Home, Kids.* Several times, I choked up. I was tempted to add personal bits, to let Diana know it wasn't just *anyone* making a request. This was *me*! I was *special*! But I stuck to the armpit script. At the appropriate moment (insert sacrifice here), I dropped the Sibyl's jelly jar into the fire. I was afraid it might just sit there heating up, but the glass shattered immediately, releasing a sigh of silver fumes. I hoped I hadn't squandered the soundless god's final breath.

I finished the incantation. Tyson mercifully lowered his arm. Ella stared at the fire, then at the sky, her nose twitching anxiously. "Apollo hesitated," she said. "He didn't read the third line right. He probably messed up. I hope he didn't mess it up."

"Your confidence is heartwarming," I said.

But I shared her concern. I saw no signs of divine help in the night sky. The red full moon continued to leer at me, bathing the landscape in bloody

light. No hunting horns trumpeted in the distance—just a fresh round of explosions from the Oakland Hills, and cries of battle from New Rome.

"You messed up," Ella decided.

"Give it time!" I said. "Gods don't always show up immediately. Once it took me ten years to answer some prayers from the city of Pompeii, and by the time I got there…Maybe that's not a good example."

Ella wrung her hands. "Tyson and Ella will wait here in case the goddess shows up. Apollo should go fight stuff."

"Aww." Tyson pouted. "But *I* wanna fight stuff!"

"Tyson will wait here with Ella," Ella insisted. "Apollo, go fight."

I scanned the valley. Several rooftops in New Rome were now on fire. Meg would be fighting in the streets, doing gods-knew-what with her weaponized unicorns. Hazel would be desperately shoring up the defenses as zombies and ghouls boiled up from the sewers, attacking civilians. They needed help, and it would take me less time to reach New Rome than to get to the Caldecott Tunnel.

But just thinking about joining the battle made my stomach flare with pain. I remembered how I'd collapsed in the tyrant's tomb. I would be of little use against Tarquin. Being near him would just accelerate my promotion to Zombie of the Month.

I gazed at the Oakland Hills, their silhouettes lit by flickering explosions. The emperors must be battling Frank's defenders at the Caldecott Tunnel by now. Without Arion or a Go-Glo bike, I wasn't sure I could make it there in time to do any good, but it seemed like my least horrible option.

"Charge," I said miserably.

I jogged off across the valley.

35

Such a deal for you
Two-for-one single combat
Kill us both for free!

THE MOST EMBARRASSING THING? As I wheezed and huffed up the hill, I found myself humming “Ride of the Valkyries.” Curse you, Richard Wagner. Curse you, *Apocalypse Now.*

By the time I reached the summit, I was dizzy and drenched in sweat. I took in the scene below and decided my presence would mean nothing. I was too late.

The hills were a scarred wasteland of trenches, shattered armor, and broken war machines. A hundred yards down Highway 24, the emperors’ troops had formed up in columns. Instead of thousands, there were now a few hundred: a combination of Germanus bodyguards, Khromandae, pandai, and other humanoid tribes. One small mercy: no myrmekes remained. Frank’s strategy of targeting the giant ants had apparently worked.

At the entrance to the Caldecott Tunnel, directly beneath me, waited the remnants of the Twelfth Legion. A dozen ragged demigods formed a shield wall across the inbound lanes. A young woman I didn’t recognize held the legion standard, which could only mean that Jacob had either been killed or gravely wounded. The overheated gold eagle smoked so badly I couldn’t make out its form. It wouldn’t be zapping any more enemies today.

Hannibal the elephant stood with the troops in his Kevlar armor, his trunk and legs bleeding from dozens of cuts. In front of the line towered an

eight-foot-tall Kodiak bear—Frank Zhang, I assumed. Three arrows bristled in his shoulder, but his claws were out and ready for more battle.

My heart twisted. Perhaps, as a large bear, Frank could survive with a few arrows stuck in him. But what would happen when he tried to turn human again?

As for the other survivors…I simply couldn't believe they were all that remained of three cohorts. Maybe the missing ones were wounded rather than dead. Perhaps I should've taken comfort in the possibility that, for every legionnaire who had fallen, hundreds of enemies had been destroyed. But they looked so tragic, so hopelessly outnumbered guarding the entrance to Camp Jupiter….

I lifted my gaze beyond the highway, out to the bay, and lost all hope. The emperors' fleet was still in position—a string of floating white palaces ready to rain destruction upon us, then host a massive victory celebration.

Even if we somehow managed to destroy all the enemies remaining on Highway 24, those yachts were beyond our reach. Whatever Lavinia had been planning, she had apparently failed. With a single order, the emperors could lay waste to the entire camp.

The clop of hooves and rattle of wheels drew my attention back to the enemy lines. Their columns parted. The emperors themselves came out to parley, standing side-by-side in a golden chariot.

Commodus and Caligula looked like they'd had a competition to pick the gaudiest armor, and both of them had lost. They were clad head to toe in Imperial gold: greaves, kilts, breastplates, gloves, helmets, all with elaborate gorgon and Fury designs, encrusted with precious gems. Their faceplates were fashioned like grimacing demons. I could only tell the two emperors apart because Commodus was taller and broader in the shoulders.

Pulling the chariot were two white horses…No. Not horses. Their backs carried long, ugly scars on either side of their spines. Their withers were scored with lash marks. Their handlers/torturers walked beside them, gripping their reins and keeping cattle prods ready in case the beasts got any ideas.

Oh, gods…

I fell to my knees and retched. Of all the horrors I had seen, this struck me as the worst of all. Those once-beautiful steeds were pegasi. What kind of monster would cut off the wings of a pegasus?

The emperors obviously wanted to send a message: they intended to dominate the world at any cost. They would stop at nothing. They would mutilate and maim. They would waste and destroy. Nothing was sacred except their own power.

I rose unsteadily. My hopelessness turned into boiling anger.

I howled, “NO!”

My cry echoed through the ravine. The emperors’ retinue clattered to a stop. Hundreds of faces turned upward, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. I clambered down the hill, lost my footing, somersaulted, banged into a tree, staggered to my feet, and kept going.

No one tried to shoot me. No one yelled, *Hooray, we’re saved!* Frank’s defenders and the emperors’ troops simply watched, dumbstruck, as I made my way downhill—a single beat-up teenager in tattered clothes and mud-caked shoes, with a ukulele and a bow on my back. It was, I suspected, the least impressive arrival of reinforcements in history.

At last I reached the legionnaires on the highway.

Caligula studied me from across fifty feet of asphalt. He burst out laughing.

Hesitantly, his troops followed his example—except for the Germani, who rarely laughed.

Commodus shifted in his golden armor. “Excuse me, could someone caption this scene for me? What’s going on?”

Only then did I realize Commodus’s eyesight had not recovered as well as he’d hoped. Probably, I thought with bitter satisfaction, my blinding flash of divine radiance at the Waystation had left him able to see a little bit in full daylight, but not at all at night. A small blessing, if I could figure out how to use it.

“I wish I could describe it,” Caligula said dryly. “The mighty god Apollo has come to the rescue, and he’s never looked better.”

“That was sarcasm?” Commodus asked. “Does he look horrible?”

“Yes,” Caligula said.

“HA!” Commodus forced a laugh. “Ha! Apollo, you look horrible!”

My hands trembling, I nocked an arrow and fired it at Caligula’s face. My aim was true, but Caligula swatted aside the projectile like it was a sleepy horsefly.

“Don’t embarrass yourself, Lester,” he said. “Let the leaders talk.”

He turned his grimacing face mask toward the Kodiak bear. “Well, Frank Zhang? You have a chance to surrender with honor. Bow to your emperor!”

“Emperors,” Commodus corrected.

“Yes, of course,” Caligula said smoothly. “Praetor Zhang, you are duty-bound to recognize Roman authority, and we are it! Together, we can rebuild this camp and raise your legion to glory! No more hiding. No more cowering behind Terminus’s weak boundaries. It is time to be true Romans and conquer the world. Join us. Learn from Jason Grace’s mistake.”

I howled again. This time, I launched an arrow at Commodus. Yes, it was petty. I thought I could hit a blind emperor more easily, but he, too, swatted the arrow away.

“Cheap shot, Apollo!” he yelled. “There’s nothing wrong with my hearing or my reflexes.”

The Kodiak bear bellowed. With one claw, he broke the arrow shafts in his shoulder. He shrank, changing into Frank Zhang. The arrow stubs pierced his breastplate at the shoulder. He’d lost his helmet. The side of his body was soaked in blood, but his expression was pure determination.

Next to him, Hannibal trumpeted and pawed the pavement, ready to charge.

“No, buddy.” Frank glanced at his last dozen comrades, weary and wounded but still ready to follow him to the death. “Enough blood has been shed.”

Caligula inclined his head in agreement. “So, you yield, then?”

“Oh, no.” Frank straightened, though the effort made him wince. “I have an alternative solution. *Spolia opima.*”

Nervous murmurs rippled through the emperors’ columns. Some of the Germani raised their bushy eyebrows. A few of Frank’s legionnaires looked like they wanted to say something—*Are you crazy?*, for instance—but they held their tongues.

Commodus laughed. He pulled off his helmet, revealing his shaggy curls and beard, his cruel, handsome face. His gaze was milky and unfocused, the skin around his eyes still pitted as if he’d been splashed with acid.

“Single combat?” He grinned. “I *love* this idea!”

“I’ll take you both,” Frank offered. “You and Caligula against me. You win and make it through the tunnel, the camp is yours.”

Commodus rubbed his hands. “Glorious!”

“Wait,” Caligula snapped. He removed his own helmet. He did not look delighted. His eyes glittered, his mind no doubt racing as he thought over all the angles. “This is too good to be true. What are you playing at, Zhang?”

“Either I kill you, or I die,” Frank said. “That’s all. Get through me, and you can march right into camp. I’ll order my remaining troops to stand down. You can have your triumphal parade through New Rome like you’ve always wanted.” Frank turned to one of his comrades. “You hear that, Colum? Those are my orders. If I die, you will make sure they are honored.”

Colum opened his mouth but apparently didn’t trust himself to speak. He just nodded dourly.

Caligula frowned. “Spolia opima. It’s so primitive. It hasn’t been done since…”

He stopped himself, perhaps remembering the kind of troops he had at his back: “primitive” Germani, who viewed single combat as the most honorable way for a leader to win a battle. In earlier times, Romans had felt the same way. The first king, Romulus, had personally defeated an enemy king, Acron, stripping him of his armor and weapons. For centuries after, Roman generals tried to emulate Romulus, going out of their way to find enemy leaders on the battlefield for single combat, so they could claim spolia opima. It was the ultimate display of courage for any true Roman.

Frank’s ploy was clever. The emperors couldn’t refuse his challenge without losing face in front of their troops. On the other hand, Frank was badly wounded. He couldn’t possibly win without help.

“Two against two!” I yelped, surprising even myself. “I’ll fight!”

That got another round of laughter from the emperors’ troops. Commodus said, “Even better!”

Frank looked horror-stricken, which wasn’t the sort of thank-you I’d been hoping for.

“Apollo, no,” he said. “I can handle this. Clear off!”

A few months ago, I would have been happy to let Frank take this hopeless fight on his own while I sat back, ate chilled grapes, and checked my messages. Not now, not after Jason Grace. I glanced at the poor maimed pegasi chained to the emperors’ chariot, and I decided I couldn’t live in a world where cruelty like that went unchallenged.

“Sorry, Frank,” I said. “You won’t face this alone.” I looked at Caligula. “Well, Baby Booties? Your colleague emperor has already agreed. Are you in, or do we terrify you too much?”

Caligula's nostrils flared. "We have lived for thousands of years," he said, as if explaining a simple fact to a slow student. "We are gods."

"And I'm the son of Mars," Frank countered, "praetor of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata. I'm not afraid to die. Are you?"

The emperors stayed silent for a count of five.

Finally, Caligula called over his shoulder, "Gregorix!"

One of the Germani jogged forward. With his massive height and weight, his shaggy hair and beard, and his thick hide armor, he looked like Frank in Kodiak bear form, only with an uglier face.

"Lord?" he grunted.

"The troops are to stay where they are," Caligula ordered. "No interference while Commodus and I kill Praetor Zhang and his pet god. Understood?"

Gregorix studied me. I could imagine him silently wrestling with his ideas of honor. Single combat was good. Single combat against a wounded warrior and a zombie-infected weakling, however, was not much of a victory. The smart thing would be to slaughter all of us and march on into the camp. But a challenge had been issued. Challenges had to be accepted. But his job was to protect the emperors, and if this was some sort of trap…

I bet Gregorix was wishing he'd pursued that business degree his mom always wanted him to get. Being a barbarian bodyguard was mentally exhausting.

"Very well, my lord," he said.

Frank faced his remaining troops. "Get out of here. Find Hazel. Defend the city from Tarquin."

Hannibal trumpeted in protest.

"You too, buddy," Frank said. "No elephants are going to die today."

Hannibal huffed. The demigods obviously didn't like it either, but they were Roman legionnaires, too well trained to disobey a direct order. They retreated into the tunnel with the elephant and the legion's standard, leaving only Frank Zhang and me on Team Camp Jupiter.

While the emperors climbed down from their chariot, Frank turned to me and wrapped me in a sweaty, bloody embrace. I'd always figured him for a hugger, so this didn't surprise me, until he whispered in my ear, "You're interfering with my plan. When I say 'Time's up,' I don't care where you are or how the fight is going, I want you to run away from me as fast as you can. That's an order."

He clapped me on my back and let me go.

I wanted to protest, *You're not the boss of me!* I hadn't come here to run away on command. I could do that quite well on my own. I certainly wasn't going to allow another friend to sacrifice himself for my sake.

On the other hand, I didn't know Frank's plan. I'd have to wait and see what he had in mind. Then I could decide what to do. Besides, if we stood any chance of winning a death match against Commodus and Caligula, it wouldn't be on account of our superior strength and charming personalities. We needed some serious, industrial-strength cheating.

The emperors strode toward us across the scorched and buckled asphalt.

Up close, their armor was even more hideous. Caligula's breastplate looked like it had been coated with glue, then rolled through the display cases at Tiffany & Co.

"Well." He gave us a smile as bright and cold as his jewel collection. "Shall we?"

Commodus took off his gauntlets. His hands were huge and rough, callused as if he'd been punching brick walls in his spare time. It was hard to believe I had ever held those hands with affection.

"Caligula, you take Zhang," he said. "I'll take Apollo. I don't need my eyesight to find him. I'll just follow my ears. He'll be the one whimpering."

I hated that he knew me so well.

Frank drew his sword. Blood still oozed from his shoulder wounds. I wasn't sure how he planned to remain standing, much less do battle. His other hand brushed the cloth pouch that held his piece of firewood.

"So we're clear on the rules," he said. "There aren't any. We kill you, you die."

Then he gestured at the emperors: *Come and get it.*

36

Not again. My heart.
How many syllables is
“Total hopelessness”?

EVEN IN MY WEAKENED condition, you’d think I would be able to stay out of reach of a blind opponent.

You’d be wrong.

Commodus was only ten yards away when I shot my next arrow at him. Somehow he dodged it, rushed in, and yanked the bow out of my hands. He broke the weapon over his knee.

“RUDE!” I yelled.

In retrospect, that was not the way I should have spent that millisecond. Commodus punched me square in the chest. I staggered backward and collapsed on my butt, my lungs on fire, my sternum throbbing. A hit like that should have killed me. I wondered if my godly strength had decided to make a cameo appearance. If so, I squandered the opportunity to strike back. I was too busy crawling away, crying in pain.

Commodus laughed, turning to his troops. “You see? He’s always the one whimpering!”

His followers cheered. Commodus wasted valuable time basking in their adulation. He couldn’t help being a showman. He also must’ve known I wasn’t going anywhere.

I glanced at Frank. He and Caligula circled each other, occasionally trading blows, testing each other’s defenses. With the arrowheads in his shoulder, Frank had no choice but to favor his left side. He moved stiffly,

leaving a trail of bloody footprints on the asphalt that reminded me—quite inappropriately—of a ballroom-dancing diagram Fred Astaire had once given me.

Caligula prowled around him, supremely confident. He wore the same self-satisfied smile he'd had when he impaled Jason Grace in the back. For weeks I'd had nightmares about that smile.

I shook myself out of my stupor. I was supposed to be doing something. Not dying. Yes. That was at the top of my *to-do* list.

I managed to get up. I fumbled for my sword, then remembered I didn't have one. My only weapon now was my ukulele. Playing a song for an enemy who was hunting me by sound did not seem like the wisest move, but I grabbed the uke by the fret board.

Commodus must have heard the strings twang. He turned and drew his sword.

For a big man in blinged-out armor, he moved much too fast. Before I could even decide which Dean Martin number to play for him, he jabbed at me, nearly opening up my belly. The point of his blade sparked against the bronze body of the ukulele.

With both hands, he raised his sword overhead to cleave me in two.

I lunged forward and poked him in the gut with my instrument. "Ha-ha!"

There were two problems with this: 1) his gut was covered in armor, and 2) the ukulele had a rounded bottom. I made a mental note that if I survived this battle, I would design a version with spikes at the base, and perhaps a flamethrower—the Gene Simmons ukulele.

Commodus's counterstrike would've killed me if he hadn't been laughing so hard. I leaped aside as his sword hurtled down, sinking into the spot where I'd been standing. One good thing about battling on a highway—all those explosions and lightning strikes had made the asphalt soft. While Commodus tried to tug his sword free, I charged and slammed into him.

To my surprise, I actually managed to shove him off-balance. He stumbled and landed on his armor-plated rear, leaving his sword quivering in the pavement.

Nobody in the emperors' army cheered for me. Tough crowd.

I took a step back, trying to catch my breath. Someone pressed against my back. I yelped, terrified that Caligula was about to spear me, but it was only Frank. Caligula stood about twenty feet away from him, cursing as he wiped bits of gravel from his eyes.

“Remember what I said,” Frank told me.

“Why are you doing this?” I wheezed.

“It’s the only way. If we’re lucky, we’re buying time.”

“Buying time?”

“For godly help to arrive. That’s still happening, right?”

I gulped. “Maybe?”

“Apollo, please tell me you did the summoning ritual.”

“I did!”

“Then we’re buying time,” Frank insisted.

“And if help doesn’t arrive?”

“Then you’ll have to trust me. Do what I told you. On my cue, get out of the tunnel.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant. We weren’t *in* the tunnel, but our chat time had ended. Commodus and Caligula closed in on us simultaneously.

“Gravel in the eyes, Zhang?” Caligula snarled. “Really?”

Their blades crossed as Caligula pushed Frank toward the mouth of the Caldecott Tunnel…or was Frank letting himself be pushed? The clang of metal against metal echoed through the empty passageway.

Commodus tugged his own sword free of the asphalt. “All right, Apollo. This has been fun. But you need to die now.”

He howled and charged, his voice booming back at him from the depths of the tunnel.

Echoes, I thought.

I ran for the Caldecott.

Echoes can be confusing for people who depend on their hearing. Inside the shaft, I might have more luck avoiding Commodus. Yes…that was my strategy. I wasn’t simply panicking and running for my life. Entering the tunnel was a perfectly levelheaded, well-reasoned plan that just happened to involve me screaming and fleeing.

I turned before Commodus overtook me. I swung my ukulele, intending to imprint its soundboard on his face, but Commodus anticipated my move. He yanked the instrument out of my hands.

I stumbled away from him, and Commodus committed the most heinous of crimes: with one huge fist, he crumpled my ukulele like an aluminum can and tossed it aside.

“Heresy!” I roared.

A reckless, terrible anger possessed me. I challenge you to feel differently when you've just watched someone destroy your ukulele. It would render any person insensible with rage.

My first punch left a fist-size crater in the emperor's gold breastplate. *Oh,* I thought in some distant corner of my mind. *Hello, godly strength!*

Off-balance, Commodus slashed wildly. I blocked his arm and punched him in the nose, causing a brittle *squish* that I found delightfully disgusting.

He yowled, blood streaming through his mustache. "U duhh stike bee? I kilb u!"

"You won't kilb me!" I shouted back. "I have my strength back!"

"HA!" Commodus cried. "I nebbeh lost mine! An I'm stih bigguh!"

I hate it when megalomaniac villains make valid points.

He barreled toward me. I ducked underneath his arm and kicked him in the back, propelling him into a guardrail on the side of the tunnel. His forehead hit the metal with a dainty sound like a triangle: *DING!*

That should have made me feel quite satisfied, except my ruined-ukulele-inspired rage was ebbing, and with it my burst of divine strength. I could feel the zombie poison creeping through my capillaries, wriggling and burning its way into every part of my body. My gut wound seemed to be unraveling, about to spill my stuffing everywhere like a raggedy Olympian Pooh Bear.

Also, I was suddenly aware of the many large, unmarked crates stacked along one side of the tunnel, taking up the entire length of the raised pedestrian walkway. Along the other side of the tunnel, the shoulder of the road was torn up and lined with orange traffic barrels…. Not unusual in themselves, but it struck me that they were just about the right size to contain the urns I'd seen Frank's workers carrying during our holographic scroll call.

In addition, every five feet or so, a thin groove had been cut across the width of the asphalt. Again, not unusual in itself—the highway department could've just been doing some repaving work. But each groove glistened with some kind of liquid…. Oil?

Taken together, these things made me deeply uncomfortable, and Frank kept retreating farther into the tunnel, luring Caligula to follow.

Apparently, Caligula's lieutenant, Gregorix, was also getting worried. The Germanus shouted from the front lines, "My emperor! You're getting too far—"

"Shut up, GREG!" Caligula yelled. "If you want to keep your tongue, don't tell me how to fight!"

Commodus was still struggling to get up.

Caligula stabbed at Frank's chest, but the praetor wasn't there. Instead, a small bird—a common swift, judging from its boomerang-shaped tail—shot straight toward the emperor's face.

Frank knew his birds. Swifts aren't large or impressive. They aren't obvious threats like falcons or eagles, but they are incredibly fast and maneuverable.

He drove his beak into Caligula's left eye and zoomed away, leaving the emperor shrieking and swatting at the air.

Frank materialized in human form right next me. His eyes looked sunken and glazed. His bad arm hung limp at his side.

"If you really want to help," he said in a low voice, "hobble Commodus. I don't think I can hold them both."

"What—?"

He transformed back into a swift and was gone—darting at Caligula, who cursed and slashed at the tiny bird.

Commodus charged me once more. This time he was smart enough not to announce himself by howling. By the time I noticed him bearing down on me—blood bubbling from his nostrils, a deep guardrail-shaped groove in his forehead—it was too late.

He slammed his fist into my gut, the *exact* spot I didn't want to be hit. I collapsed in a moaning, boneless heap.

Outside, the enemy troops erupted in a fresh round of cheering. Commodus again turned to accept their adulation. I'm ashamed to admit that instead of feeling relieved to have a few extra seconds of life, I was annoyed that he wasn't executing me faster.

Every cell in my miserable mortal body screamed, *Just finish it!* Getting killed could *not* hurt any worse than the way I already felt. If I died, maybe I'd at least come back as a zombie and get to bite off Commodus's nose.

I was now certain Diana wasn't coming to the rescue. Maybe I had messed up the ritual, as Ella feared. Maybe my sister hadn't received the call. Or maybe Jupiter had forbidden her from helping on pain of sharing my mortal punishment.

Whatever the case, Frank, too, must have known our situation was hopeless. We were well past the "buying time" phase. We were now into the "dying as a futile gesture sure is painful" phase.

My line of vision was reduced to a blurry red cone, but I focused on Commodus's calves as he paced in front of me, thanking his adoring fans.

Strapped to the inside of his calf was a sheathed dagger.

He had always carried one of those back in the old days. When you're an emperor, the paranoia never stops. You could be assassinated by your housekeeper, your waiter, your launderer, your best friend. And then, despite all your precautions, your godly ex-lover disguised as your wrestling trainer ends up drowning you in your bathtub. Surprise!

Hobble Commodus, Frank had told me.

I had no energy left, but I owed Frank a last request.

My body screamed in protest as I stretched out my hand and grabbed the dagger. It slipped easily from its sheath—kept well-oiled for a quick draw. Commodus didn't even notice. I stabbed him in the back of the left knee, then the right before he had even registered the pain. He screamed and toppled forward, spewing Latin obscenities I hadn't heard since the reign of Vespasian.

Hobbling accomplished. I dropped the knife, all my willpower gone. I waited to see what would kill me. The emperors? The zombie poison? The suspense?

I craned my neck to see how my friend the common swift was doing. Not well, it turned out. Caligula scored a lucky hit with the flat of his blade, smacking Frank into the wall. The little bird tumbled limply, and Frank shifted back into human form just in time for his face to hit the pavement.

Caligula grinned at me, his wounded eye closed tight, his voice filled with hideous glee. "Are you watching, Apollo? You remember what happens next?"

He raised his sword over Frank's back.

"NO!" I screamed.

I could not witness another friend's death. Somehow, I got to my feet, but I was much too slow. Caligula brought down his blade…which bent in half like a pipe cleaner against Frank's cloak. Thank the gods of military fashion statements! Frank's praetor's cape *could* turn back weapons, even as its ability to transform into a sweater wrap remained unknown.

Caligula snarled in frustration. He drew his dagger, but Frank had recovered enough strength to stand. He slammed Caligula against the wall and wrapped his good hand around the emperor's throat.

"Time's up!" he roared.

Time's up. Wait…that was my cue. I was supposed to run. But I couldn't. I stared, frozen in horror, as Caligula buried his dagger in Frank's belly.

"Yes, it is," Caligula croaked. "For you."

Frank squeezed harder, crushing the emperor's throat, making Caligula's face turn a bloated purple. Using his wounded arm, which must have been excruciating, Frank pulled the piece of firewood from his pouch.

"Frank!" I sobbed.

He glanced over, silently ordering me: *GO.*

I could not bear it. Not again. Not like Jason. I was dimly aware of Commodus struggling to crawl toward me, to grab my ankles.

Frank raised his piece of firewood to Caligula's face. The emperor fought and thrashed, but Frank was stronger—drawing, I suspected, on everything that remained of his mortal life.

"If I'm going to burn," he said, "I might as well burn bright. This is for Jason."

The firewood spontaneously combusted, as if it had been waiting years for this chance. Caligula's eyes widened with panic, perhaps just now beginning to understand. Flames roared around Frank's body, sparking the oil in one of the grooves on the asphalt—a liquid fuse, racing in both directions to the crates and traffic barrels that packed the tunnel. The emperors weren't the only ones who kept a supply of Greek fire.

I am not proud of what happened next. As Frank became a column of flame, and the emperor Caligula disintegrated into white-hot embers, I followed Frank's last order. I leaped over Commodus and ran for open air. At my back, the Caldecott Tunnel erupted like a volcano.

37

I didn't do it.
Explosion? I don't know her.
Probably Greg's fault.

A THIRD-DEGREE BURN was the least painful thing I carried from that tunnel.

I staggered into the open, my back sizzling, my hands steaming, every muscle in my body feeling like it had been scored with razorblades. Before me spread the remaining forces of the emperors: hundreds of battle-ready warriors. In the distance, stretched across the bay, fifty yachts waited, primed to fire their doomsday artillery.

None of that hurt as much as knowing I had left Frank Zhang in the flames.

Caligula was gone. I could feel it—like the earth heaved a sigh of relief as his consciousness disintegrated in a blast of superheated plasma. But, oh, the cost. Frank. Beautiful, awkward, lumbering, brave, strong, sweet, noble Frank.

I would have sobbed, but my tear ducts were as dry as Mojave gulches.

The enemy forces looked as stunned as I was. Even the Germani were slack-jawed. It takes a lot to shock an imperial bodyguard. Watching your bosses get blown up in a massive fiery belch from the side of a mountain—that will do it.

Behind me, a barely human voice gurgled, "URGSSHHH."

I turned.

I was too dead inside to feel fear or disgust. Of *course* Commodus was still alive. He crawled out of the smoke-filled cavern on his elbows, his armor half-melted, his skin coated with ash. His once-beautiful face looked like a burnt loaf of tomato bread.

I hadn't hobbled him well enough. Somehow, I'd missed his ligaments. I'd messed up everything, even Frank's last request.

None of the troops rushed to the emperor's aid. They remained frozen in disbelief. Perhaps they didn't recognize this wrecked creature as Commodus. Perhaps they thought he was doing another one of his spectacles and they were waiting for the right moment to applaud.

Incredibly, Commodus struggled to his feet. He wobbled like a 1975 Elvis.

"SHIPS!" he croaked. He slurred the word so badly, for a moment I thought he'd yelled something else. I suppose his troops thought the same thing, since they did nothing.

"FIRE!" Commodus groaned, which again could have simply meant *HEY, LOOK, I'M ON FIRE*.

I only understood his order a heartbeat later, when Gregorix yelled, "SIGNAL THE YACHTS!"

I choked on my tongue.

Commodus gave me a ghastly smile. His eyes glittered with hatred.

I don't know where I found the strength, but I charged and tackled him. We hit the asphalt, my legs straddling his chest, my hands wrapped around his throat as they had been thousands of years before, the first time I killed him. This time, I felt no bittersweet regret, no lingering sense of love. Commodus fought, but his fists were like paper. I let loose a guttural roar—a song with only one note: pure rage, and only one volume: maximum.

Under the onslaught of sound, Commodus crumbled to ash.

My voice faltered. I stared at my empty palms. I stood and backed away, horrified. The charred outline of the emperor's body remained on the asphalt. I could still feel the pulse of his carotid arteries under my fingers. What had I done? In my thousands of years of life, I'd never destroyed someone with my voice. When I sang, people would often say I "killed it," but they never meant that *literally*.

The emperors' troops stared at me in astonishment. Given another moment, they surely would have attacked, but their attention was diverted by

a flare gun going off nearby. A tennis-ball-size globe of orange fire arced into the sky, trailing Tang-colored smoke.

The troops turned toward the bay, waiting for the fireworks show that would destroy Camp Jupiter. I'll admit—as tired and helpless and emotionally shattered as I was, all I could do was watch, too.

On fifty aft decks, green dots flickered as the Greek fire charges were uncovered in their mortars. I imagined pandos technicians scrambling about, inputting their final coordinates.

PLEASE, ARTEMIS, I prayed. *NOW WOULD BE A GREAT TIME TO SHOW UP.*

The weapons fired. Fifty green fireballs rose into the sky, like emeralds on a floating necklace, illuminating the entire bay. They rose straight upward, struggling to gain altitude.

My fear turned to confusion. I knew a few things about flying. You couldn't take off at a ninety-degree angle. If I tried that in the sun chariot… well, first of all, I would've fallen off and looked really stupid. But also, the horses could never have made such a steep climb. They would have toppled into each other and crashed back into the gates of the Sun Palace. You'd have an eastern sunrise, followed immediately by an eastern sunset and lots of angry whinnying.

Why would the mortars be aimed like that?

The green fireballs climbed another fifty feet. A hundred feet. Slowed. On Highway 24, the entire enemy army mimicked their movements, standing up straighter and straighter as the projectiles rose, until all the Germani, Khromandae, and other assorted baddies were on their tippy-toes, poised as if levitating. The fireballs stopped and hovered in midair.

Then the emeralds fell straight down, right onto the yachts from which they had come.

The display of mayhem was worthy of the emperors themselves. Fifty yachts exploded in green mushroom clouds, sending confetti of shattered wood, metal, and tiny little flaming monster bodies into the air. Caligula's multi-billion-dollar fleet was reduced to a string of burning oil slicks on the surface of the bay.

I may have laughed. I know that was quite insensitive, considering the environmental impact of the disaster. Also terribly inappropriate, given how heartbroken I felt about Frank. But I couldn't help it.

The enemy troops turned as one to stare at me.

Oh, right, I reminded myself. *I am still facing hundreds of hostiles.*

But they didn't look very hostile. Their expressions were stunned and unsure.

I had destroyed Commodus with a shout. I had helped burn Caligula to cinders. Despite my humble appearance, the troops had probably heard rumors that I was once a god. Was it possible, they'd be wondering, that I had somehow caused the fleet's destruction?

In point of fact, I had no idea what had gone wrong with the fleet's weapons. I doubted it was Artemis. It just didn't *feel* like something she would do. As for Lavinia…I didn't see how she could've pulled off a trick like that with just some fauns, a few dryads, and some chewing gum.

I knew it wasn't me.

But the army didn't know that.

I cobbled together the last shreds of my courage. I channeled my old sense of arrogance, from back in the days when I loved to take credit for things I didn't do (as long as they were good and impressive). I gave Gregorix and his army a cruel, emperor-like smile.

"BOO!" I shouted.

The troops broke and ran. They scattered down the highway in a panic, some leaping straight over the guardrails and into the void just to get away from me faster. Only the poor tortured pegasi stayed put, since they had no choice. They were still fastened in their harnesses, the chariot wheels staked to the asphalt to keep the animals from bolting. In any case, I doubted they would have wanted to follow their tormentors.

I fell to my knees. My gut wound throbbed. My charred back had gone numb. My heart seemed to be pumping cold, liquid lead. I would be dead soon. Or undead. It hardly mattered. The two emperors were gone. Their fleet was destroyed. Frank was no more.

On the bay, the burning oil pools belched columns of smoke that turned orange in the light of the blood moon. It was without a doubt the loveliest trash fire I'd ever beheld.

After a moment of shocked silence, the Bay Area emergency services seem to register the new problem. The East Bay had already been deemed a disaster area. With the tunnel closure and the mysterious string of wildfires and explosions in the hills, sirens had been wailing across the flatlands. Emergency lights flickered everywhere on the jammed streets.

Now Coast Guard vessels joined the party, cutting across the water to reach the burning oil spills. Police and news helicopters veered toward the scene from a dozen different directions as if being pulled by a magnet. The Mist would be working overtime tonight.

I was tempted to just lie down on the road and go to sleep. I knew if I did that, I would die, but at least there would be no more pain. Oh, Frank.

And why hadn't Artemis come to help me? I wasn't mad at her. I understood all too well how gods could be, all the different reasons they might not show up when you called. Still, it hurt, being ignored by my own sister.

An indignant huff jarred me from my thoughts. The pegasi were glaring at me. The one on the left had a blind eye, poor thing, but he shook his bridle and made a raspberry kind of sound as if to say, *GET OVER YOURSELF, DUDE.*

The pegasus was correct. Other people were hurting. Some of them needed my help. Tarquin was still alive—I could feel it in my zombie-infected blood. Hazel and Meg might well be fighting undead in the streets of New Rome.

I wouldn't be much good to them, but I had to try. Either I could die with my friends, or they could cut off my head after I turned into a brain-eater, which was what friends were for.

I rose and staggered toward the pegasi.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," I told them. "You are beautiful animals and you deserve better."

One Eye grunted as if to say, *YA THINK?*

"I'll free you now, if you'll let me."

I fumbled with their tack and harness. I found an abandoned dagger on the asphalt and cut away the barbed wire and spiked cuffs that had been digging into the animals' flesh. I carefully avoided their hooves in case they decided I was worth a kick in the head.

Then I started humming Dean Martin's "Ain't That a Kick in the Head," because that's just the kind of awful week I was having.

"There," I said when the pegasi were free. "I have no right to ask anything of you, but if you could see your way to giving me a ride over the hills, my friends are in danger."

The pegasus on the right, who still had both eyes but whose ears had been cruelly snipped, whinnied an emphatic *NO!* He trotted toward the

College Avenue exit, then stopped halfway and looked back at his friend.

One Eye grunted and tossed his mane. I imagined his silent exchange with Short Ears went something like this.

One Eye: *I'm gonna give this pathetic loser a ride. You go ahead. I'll catch up.*

Short Ears: *You're crazy, man. If he gives you any trouble, kick him in the head.*

One Eye: *You know I will.*

Short Ears trotted off into the night. I couldn't blame him for leaving. I hoped he would find a safe place to rest and heal.

One Eye nickered at me. *Well?*

I took one last look at the Caldecott Tunnel, the interior still a maelstrom of green flames. Even without fuel, Greek fire would just keep burning and burning, and that conflagration had been started with Frank's life force—a final, thermal burst of heroism that had vaporized Caligula. I didn't pretend to understand what Frank had done, or why he had made that choice, but I understood he'd felt it was the only way. He'd burned brightly, all right. The last word Caligula had heard as he got blasted into tiny particles of soot was *Jason*.

I stepped closer to the tunnel. I could barely get within fifty feet without the breath being sucked out of my lungs.

"FRANK!" I yelled. "FRANK?"

It was hopeless, I knew. There was no way Frank could have survived that. Caligula's immortal body had disintegrated instantly. Frank couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds longer, held together by sheer courage and force of will, just to be sure he took Caligula down with him.

I wished I could cry. I vaguely recalled having tear ducts, once upon a time.

Now all I had was despair, and the knowledge that as long as I wasn't dead, I had to try to help my remaining friends, no matter how much I hurt.

"I'm so sorry," I said to the flames.

The flames didn't answer. They didn't care who or what they destroyed.

I fixed my gaze on the crest of the hill. Hazel, Meg, and the last of the Twelfth Legion were on the other side, fighting off the undead. That's where I needed to be.

"Okay," I told One Eye. "I'm ready."

38

Got two words for you:
Swiss Army unicorns, man!
Okay, that's four words.

IF YOU EVER GET the chance to see weaponized unicorns in action, *don't*. It's something you can't un-see.

As we got closer to the city, I detected signs of continuing battle: columns of smoke, flames licking the tops of buildings, screams, shouts, explosions. You know, the usual.

One Eye dropped me at the Pomerian Line. He snorted in a tone that said, *Yeah, good luck with that,* then galloped away. Pegasi are intelligent creatures.

I glanced at Temple Hill, hoping to see storm clouds gathering, or a divine aura of silver light bathing the hillside, or an army of my sister's Hunters charging to the rescue. I saw nothing. I wondered if Ella and Tyson were still pacing around the shrine of Diana, checking the fire pit every thirty seconds to see if the Sibyl's jelly-jar shards were cooked yet.

Once again, I had to be a cavalry of one. Sorry, New Rome. I jogged toward the Forum, which was where I caught my first glimpse of the unicorns. Definitely *not* the usual.

Meg herself led the charge. She was not riding a unicorn. No one who values their life (or their crotch) would ever dare ride one. But she did run alongside them, exhorting them to greatness as they galloped into battle. The beasts were outfitted in Kevlar with their names printed in white block letters along their ribs: MUFFIN, BUSTER, WHANGDOODLE, SHIRLEY, and HORATIO,

the Five Unicorns of the Apocalypse. Their leather helmets reminded me of those worn by football players in the 1920s. The steeds' horns were fitted with specially designed…What would you call them? Attachments? Imagine, if you will, massive conical Swiss Army knives, with various slots from which sprang a convenient variety of destructive implements.

Meg and her friends slammed into a horde of vrykolakai—former legionnaires killed in Tarquin's previous assault, judging from their grungy bits of armor. A member of Camp Jupiter might have had trouble attacking old comrades, but Meg had no such qualms. Her swords whirled, slicing and dicing and making mounds and mounds of julienned zombies.

With a flick of their snouts, her equine friends activated their favorite accessories: a sword blade, a giant razor, a corkscrew, a fork, and a nail file. (Buster chose the nail file, which did not surprise me.) They plowed through the undead, forking them, corkscrewing them, stabbing them, and nail-filing them into oblivion.

You may wonder why I did not find it horrifying that Meg would use unicorns for war while I *had* found it horrifying that the emperors had used pegasi for their chariot. Setting aside the obvious difference—that the unicorns weren't tortured or maimed—it was clear the one-horned steeds were enjoying themselves immensely. After centuries of being treated as delightful, fanciful creatures who frolicked in meadows and danced through rainbows, these unicorns finally felt *seen* and appreciated. Meg had recognized their natural talent for kicking undead posterior.

"Hey!" Meg grinned when she saw me, like I'd just come back from the bathroom instead of the brink of doomsday. "It's working great. Unicorns are immune to undead scratches and bites!"

Shirley huffed, clearly pleased with herself. She showed me her corkscrew attachment as if to say, *Yeah, that's right. I ain't your Rainbow Pony.*

"The emperors?" Meg asked me.

"Dead. But…" My voice cracked.

Meg studied my face. She knew me well enough. She had been at my side in moments of tragedy.

Her expression darkened. "Okay. Grieve later. Right now, we should find Hazel. She's"—Meg waved vaguely toward the middle of the town —"somewhere. So is Tarquin."

Just hearing his name made my gut contort. Why, oh, why couldn't I be a unicorn?

We ran with our Swiss Army herd up the narrow, winding streets. The battle was mostly pockets of house-to-house combat. Families had barricaded their homes. Shops were boarded up. Archers lurked in upper-story windows on the lookout for zombies. Roving bands of eurynomoi attacked any living thing they could find.

As horrible as the scene was, something about it seemed oddly *subdued*. Yes, Tarquin had flooded the city with undead. Every sewer grate and manhole cover was open. But he wasn't attacking in force, sweeping systematically through the city to take control. Instead, small groups of undead were popping up everywhere at once, forcing the Romans to scramble and defend the citizenry. It felt less like an invasion and more like a diversion, as if Tarquin himself were after something specific and didn't want to be bothered.

Something specific…like a set of Sibylline Books he'd paid good money for back in 530 BCE.

My heart pumped more cold lead. "The bookstore. Meg, the bookstore!"

She frowned, perhaps wondering why I wanted to shop for books at a time like this. Then realization dawned in her eyes. "Oh."

She picked up speed, running so fast the unicorns had to break into a trot. How I managed to keep up, I don't know. I suppose, at that point, my body was so far beyond help it just said, *Run to death? Yeah, okay. Whatever.*

The fighting intensified as we climbed the hill. We passed part of the Fourth Cohort battling a dozen slavering ghouls outside a sidewalk café. From the windows above, small children and their parents were tossing things at the eurynomoi—rocks, pots, pans, bottles—while the legionnaires jabbed their spears over the tops of their locked shields.

A few blocks farther on, we found Terminus, his World War I greatcoat peppered with shrapnel holes, his nose broken clean off his marble face. Crouching behind his pedestal was a little girl—his helper, Julia, I presumed—clutching a steak knife.

Terminus turned on us with such fury I feared he would zap us into stacks of customs declaration forms.

"Oh, it's you," he grumbled. "My borders have failed. I hope you've brought help."

I looked at the terrified girl behind him, feral and fierce and ready to spring. I wondered who was protecting whom. “Ah…maybe?”

The old god’s face hardened a bit more, which shouldn’t have been possible for stone. “I see. Well. I’ve concentrated the last bits of my power here, around Julia. They may destroy New Rome, but they will *not* harm this girl!”

“Or this statue!” said Julia.

My heart turned to Smucker’s jelly. “We’ll win today, I promise.” Somehow I made it sound like I actually believed that statement. “Where’s Hazel?”

“Over there!” Terminus pointed with his nonexistent arms. Based on his glance (I couldn’t go by his nose anymore), I assumed he meant to the left. We ran in that direction until we found another cluster of legionnaires.

“Where’s Hazel?” Meg yelled.

“That way!” shouted Leila. “Two blocks maybe!”

“Thanks!” Meg sprinted on with her unicorn honor guard, their nail file and corkscrew attachments at the ready.

We found Hazel just where Leila had predicted—two blocks down, where the street widened into a neighborhood piazza. She and Arion were surrounded by zombies in the middle of the square, outnumbered about twenty to one. Arion didn’t look particularly alarmed, but he grunted and whinnied in frustration, unable to use his speed in such close quarters. Hazel slashed away with her spatha while Arion kicked at the mob to keep them back.

No doubt Hazel could’ve handled the situation without help, but our unicorns couldn’t resist the opportunity for more zombie-posterior-kicking. They crashed into the fray, slicing and bottle-opening and tweezing the undead in an awesome display of multifunction carnage.

Meg leaped into battle, her twin blades spinning. I scanned the street for abandoned projectile weapons. Sadly, they were easy to find. I scooped up a bow and quiver and went to work, giving the zombies some very fashionable skull-piercings.

When Hazel realized it was us, she laughed with relief, then scanned the area behind me, probably looking for Frank. I met her eyes. I’m afraid my expression told her everything she didn’t want to hear.

Emotions rippled across her face: utter disbelief, desolation, then anger. She yelled in rage, spurring Arion, and plowed through the last of the

zombie mob. They never had a chance.

Once the piazza was secure, Hazel cantered up to me. “What happened?”

“I…Frank…The emperors…”

That’s all I could manage. It wasn’t much of a narrative, but she seemed to get the gist.

She doubled over until her forehead touched Arion’s mane. She rocked and murmured, clutching her wrist like a ballplayer who had just broken her hand and was trying to fight down the pain. At last she straightened. She took a shaky breath. She dismounted, wrapped her arms around Arion’s neck, and whispered something in his ear.

The horse nodded. Hazel stepped back and he raced away—a streak of white heading west toward the Caldecott Tunnel. I wanted to warn Hazel there was nothing to find there, but I didn’t. I understood heartache a little better now. Each person’s grief has its own life span; it needs to follow its own path.

“Where can we find Tarquin?” she demanded. What she meant was: *Who can I kill to make myself feel better?*

I knew the answer was *No one*. But again, I didn’t argue with her. Like a fool, I led the way to the bookstore to confront the undead king.

Two eurynomoi stood guard at the entrance, which I assumed meant Tarquin was already inside. I prayed Tyson and Ella were still on Temple Hill.

With a flick of her hand, Hazel summoned two precious stones from the ground: Rubies? Fire opals? They shot past me so fast, I couldn’t be sure. They hit the ghouls right between the eyes, reducing each guard to a pile of dust. The unicorns looked disappointed—both because they couldn’t use their combat utensils, and because they realized we were going through a doorway too small for them to follow.

“Go find other enemies,” Meg told them. “Enjoy!”

The Five Unicorns of the Apocalypse happily bucked, then galloped off to do Meg’s bidding.

I barged into the bookstore, Hazel and Meg at my heels, and waded straight into a crowd of undead. Vrykolakai shuffled through the new-release aisle, perhaps looking for the latest in zombie fiction. Others bonked against the shelves of the history section, as if they knew they belonged in the past. One ghoul squatted on a comfy reading chair, drooling as he perused *The*

Illustrated Book of Vultures. Another crouched on the balcony above, happily chewing a leather-bound edition of *Great Expectations*.

Tarquin himself was too busy to notice our entrance. He stood with his back to us, at the information desk, yelling at the bookstore cat.

"Answer me, beast!" the king screamed. "Where are the Books?"

Aristophanes sat on the desk, one leg straight up in the air, calmly licking his nether regions—which, last I checked, was considered impolite in the presence of royalty.

"I will destroy you!" Tarquin said.

The cat looked up briefly, hissed, then returned to his personal grooming.

"Tarquin, leave him alone!" I shouted, though the cat seemed to need no help from me.

The king turned, and I immediately remembered why I shouldn't be near him. A tidal wave of nausea crashed over me, pushing me to my knees. My veins burned with poison. My flesh seemed to be turning inside out. None of the zombies attacked. They just stared at me with their flat dead eyes as if waiting for me to put on my HELLO, MY NAME USED TO BE name tag and start mingling.

Tarquin had accessorized for his big night out. He wore a moldy red cloak over his corroded armor. Gold rings adorned his skeletal fingers. His golden circlet crown looked newly polished, making it clash nicely with his rotted cranium. Tendrils of oily purple neon slithered around his limbs, writhing in and out of his rib cage and circling his neck bones. Since his face was a skull, I couldn't tell if he was smiling, but when he spoke, he sounded pleased to see me.

"Well, good! Killed the emperors, did you, my faithful servant? Speak!"

I had no desire to tell him anything, but a giant invisible hand squeezed my diaphragm, forcing out the words. "Dead. They're dead." I had to bite my tongue to keep from adding *lord*.

"Excellent!" Tarquin said. "So many lovely deaths tonight. And the praetor, Frank—?"

"Don't." Hazel shouldered past me. "Tarquin, don't you dare say his name."

"Ha! Dead, then. Excellent." Tarquin sniffed the air, purple gas scrolling through his skeletal nose slits. "The city is ripe with fear. Agony. Loss. Wonderful! Apollo, you're mine now, of course. I can feel your heart pumping its last few beats. And Hazel Levesque…I'm afraid you'll have to

die for collapsing my throne room on top of me. *Very* naughty trick. But this McCaffrey child…I'm in such a good mood, I might let her flee for her life and spread word of my great victory! That is, of course, if you cooperate and explain"—he pointed at the cat—"the meaning of this."

"It's a cat," I said.

So much for Tarquin's good mood. He snarled, and another wave of pain turned my spine to putty. Meg grabbed my arm before my face could hit the carpet.

"Leave him alone!" she yelled at the king. "There's no way I'm fleeing anywhere."

"Where are the Sibylline Books?" Tarquin demanded. "They are none of these!" He gestured dismissively at the shelves, then glared at Aristophanes. "And this *creature* will not speak! The harpy and the Cyclops who were rewriting the prophecies—I can *smell* that they were here, but they are gone. Where *are* they?"

I said a silent prayer of thanks for stubborn harpies. Ella and Tyson must've still been waiting at Temple Hill for divine help that wasn't coming.

Meg snorted. "You're stupid for a king. The Books aren't here. They're not even books."

Tarquin regarded my small master, then turned to his zombies. "What language is she speaking? Did that make sense to anyone?"

The zombies stared at him unhelpfully. The ghouls were too busy reading about vultures and eating *Great Expectations*.

Tarquin faced me again. "What does the girl mean? Where are the Books, and how are they not books?"

Again, my chest constricted. The words burst out of me: "Tyson. Cyclops. Prophecies tattooed on his skin. He's on Temple Hill with—"

"Quiet!" Meg ordered. My mouth clamped shut, but it was too late. The words were out of the barn. Was that the right expression?

Tarquin tilted his skull. "The chair in the back room…Yes. Yes, I see now. Ingenious! I will have to keep this harpy alive and watch her practice her art. Prophecies on flesh? Oh, I can work with that!"

"You'll never leave this place," Hazel growled. "My troops are cleaning up the last of your invaders. It's just us now. And you're about to rest in pieces."

Tarquin hissed a laugh. "Oh, my dear. Did you think *that* was the invasion? Those troops were just my skirmishers, tasked with keeping you

all divided and confused while I came here to secure the Books. Now I know where they are, which means the city can be properly pillaged! The rest of my army should be coming through your sewers right about”—he snapped his bone fingers—“now.”

39

Captain Underpants
Does not appear in this book
Copyright issues

I WAITED FOR THE sounds of renewed combat outside. The bookstore was so quiet I could almost hear the zombies breathing.

The city remained silent.

"Right about now," Tarquin repeated, snapping his finger bones again.

"Having communications issues?" Hazel asked.

Tarquin hissed. "What have you done?"

"Me? Nothing yet." Hazel drew her spatha. "That's about to change."

Aristophanes struck first. Of course the cat would make the fight all about him. With an outraged *mewl* and no apparent provocation, the giant orange tub of fur launched himself at Tarquin's face, fastening his foreclaws on the skull's eye sockets and kicking his back feet against Tarquin's rotten teeth. The king staggered under this surprise assault, screaming in Latin, his words garbled because of the cat paws in his mouth. And so the Battle of the Bookstore began.

Hazel launched herself at Tarquin. Meg seemed to accept that Hazel had first dibs on the big baddie, considering what had happened to Frank, so she concentrated on the zombies instead, using her double blades to stab and hack and push them toward the nonfiction section.

I drew an arrow, intending to shoot the ghoul on the balcony, but my hands trembled too badly. I couldn't get to my feet. My eyesight was dim

and red. On top of all that, I realized I'd drawn the only arrow remaining in my original quiver: the Arrow of Dodona.

HOLDEST THOU ON, APOLLO! the arrow said in my mind. *YIELDETH THYSELF NOT TO THE UNDEAD KING!*

Through my fog of pain, I wondered if I was going crazy.

"Are you giving me a pep talk?" The idea made me giggle. "Whew, I'm tired."

I collapsed on my butt.

Meg stepped over me and slashed a zombie who had been about to eat my face.

"Thank you," I muttered, but she'd already moved on. The ghouls had reluctantly put down their books and were now closing in on her.

Hazel stabbed at Tarquin, who had just flung Aristophanes off his face. The cat yowled as he flew across the room. He managed to catch the edge of a bookshelf and scramble to the top. He glared down at me with his green eyes, his expression implying *I meant to do that.*

The Arrow of Dodona kept talking in my head: *THOU HAST DONE WELL, APOLLO! THOU HAST ONLY ONE JOB NOW: LIVE!*

"That's a really hard job," I muttered. "I hate my job."

THOU HAST ONLY TO WAIT! HOLD ON!

"Wait for what?" I murmured. "Hold on to what? Oh…I guess I'm holding on to you."

YES! the arrow said. *YES, DOEST THOU THAT! STAYEST THOU WITH ME, APOLLO. DAREST THOU NOT DIE UPON ME, MAN!*

"Isn't that from a movie?" I asked. "Like…every movie? Wait, you actually care if I die?"

"Apollo!" yelled Meg, slashing at Great Expectations. "If you're not going to help, could you at least crawl someplace safer?"

I wanted to oblige. I really did. But my legs wouldn't work.

"Oh, look," I muttered to no one in particular. "My ankles are turning gray. Oh, wow. My hands are, too."

NO! said the arrow. *HOLD ON!*

"For what?"

CONCENTRATE UPON MY VOICE. LET US SING A SONG! THOU LIKEST SONGS, DOST THOU NOT?

"Sweet Caroline!" I warbled.

PERHAPS A DIFFERENT SONG?

“BAHM! BAHM! BAHM!” I continued.

The arrow relented and began singing along with me, though he lagged behind, since he had to translate all the lyrics into Shakespearean language.

This was how I would die: sitting on the floor of a bookstore, turning into a zombie while holding a talking arrow and singing Neil Diamond’s greatest hit. Even the Fates cannot foresee all the wonders the universe has in store for us.

At last my voice dried up. My vision tunneled. The sounds of combat seemed to reach my ears from the ends of long metal tubes.

Meg slashed through the last of Tarquin’s minions. That was a good thing, I thought distantly. I didn’t want her to die, too. Hazel stabbed Tarquin in the chest. The Roman king fell, howling in pain, ripping the sword hilt from Hazel’s grip. He collapsed against the information desk, clutching the blade with his skeletal hands.

Hazel stepped back, waiting for the zombie king to dissolve. Instead, Tarquin struggled to his feet, purple gas flickering weakly in his eye sockets.

“I have lived for millennia,” he snarled. “You could not kill me with a thousand tons of stone, Hazel Levesque. You will not kill me with a sword.”

I thought Hazel might fly at him and rip his skull off with her bare hands. Her rage was so palpable I could smell it like an approaching storm. Wait…I *did* smell an approaching storm, along with other forest scents: pine needles, morning dew on wildflowers, the breath of hunting dogs.

A large silver wolf licked my face. Lupa? A hallucination? No…a whole pack of the beasts had trotted into the store and were now sniffing the bookshelves and the piles of zombie dust.

Behind them, in the doorway, stood a girl who looked about twelve, her eyes silver-yellow, her auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was dressed for the hunt in a shimmering gray frock and leggings, a white bow in her hand. Her face was beautiful, serene, and as cold as the winter moon.

She nocked a silver arrow and met Hazel’s eyes, asking permission to finish her kill. Hazel nodded and stepped aside. The young girl aimed at Tarquin.

“Foul undead thing,” she said, her voice hard and bright with power. “When a good woman puts you down, you had best stay down.”

Her arrow lodged in the center of Tarquin’s forehead, splitting his frontal bone. The king stiffened. The tendrils of purple gas sputtered and dissipated. From the arrow’s point of entry, a ripple of fire the color of Christmas tinsel

spread across Tarquin's skull and down his body, disintegrating him utterly. His gold crown, the silver arrow, and Hazel's sword all dropped to the floor.

I grinned at the newcomer. "Hey, Sis."

Then I keeled over sideways.

The world turned fluffy, bleached of all color. Nothing hurt anymore.

I was dimly aware of Diana's face hovering over me, Meg and Hazel peering over the goddess's shoulders.

"He's almost gone," Diana said.

Then I *was* gone. My mind slipped into a pool of cold, slimy darkness.

"Oh, no, you don't." My sister's voice woke me rudely.

I'd been so comfortable, so nonexistent.

Life surged back into me—cold, sharp, and unfairly painful. Diana's face came into focus. She looked annoyed, which seemed on-brand for her.

As for me, I felt surprisingly good. The pain in my gut was gone. My muscles didn't burn. I could breathe without difficulty. I must have slept for decades.

"H-how long was I out?" I croaked.

"Roughly three seconds," she said. "Now, get up, drama queen."

She helped me to my feet. I felt a bit unsteady, but I was delighted to find that my legs had any strength at all. My skin was no longer gray. The lines of infection were gone. The Arrow of Dodona was still in my hand, though he had gone silent, perhaps in awe of the goddess's presence. Or perhaps he was still trying to get the taste of "Sweet Caroline" out of his imaginary mouth.

Meg and Hazel stood nearby, bedraggled but unharmed. Friendly gray wolves milled around them, bumping against their legs and sniffing their shoes, which had obviously been to many interesting places over the course of the day. Aristophanes regarded us all from his perch atop the bookshelf, decided he didn't care, then went back to cleaning himself.

I beamed at my sister. It was so good to see her disapproving *I-can't-believe-you're-my-brother* frown again. "I love you," I said, my voice hoarse with emotion.

She blinked, clearly unsure what to do with this information. "You really *have* changed."

"I missed you!"

"Y-yes, well. I'm here now. Even Dad couldn't argue with a Sibylline invocation from Temple Hill."

“It worked, then!” I grinned at Hazel and Meg. “It worked!”

“Yeah,” Meg said wearily. “Hi, Artemis.”

“Diana,” my sister corrected. “But hello, Meg.” For her, my sister had a smile. “You’ve done well, young warrior.”

Meg blushed. She kicked at the scattered zombie dust on the floor and shrugged. “Eh.”

I checked my stomach, which was easy, since my shirt was in tatters. The bandages had vanished, along with the festering wound. Only a thin white scar remained. “So…I’m healed?” My flab told me she hadn’t restored me to my godly self. Nah, that would have been too much to expect.

Diana raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’m not the goddess of healing, but I’m still a goddess. I think I can take care of my little brother’s boo-boos.”

“*Little* brother?”

She smirked, then turned to Hazel. “And you, Centurion. How have you been?”

Hazel was no doubt sore and stiff, but she knelt and bowed her head like a good Roman. “I’m…” She hesitated. Her world had just been shattered. She’d lost Frank. She apparently decided not to lie to the goddess. “I’m heartbroken and exhausted, my lady. But thank you for coming to our aid.”

Diana’s expression softened. “Yes. I know it has been a difficult night. Come, let’s go outside. It’s rather stuffy in here, and it smells like burnt Cyclops.”

The survivors were slowly gathering on the street. Perhaps some instinct had drawn them there, to the place of Tarquin’s defeat. Or perhaps they’d simply come to gawk at the glowing silver chariot with its team of four golden reindeer now parallel-parked in front of the bookshop.

Giant eagles and hunting falcons shared the rooftops. Wolves hobnobbed with Hannibal the elephant and the weaponized unicorns. Legionnaires and citizens of New Rome milled about in shock.

At the end of the street, huddled with a group of survivors, was Thalia Grace, her hand on the shoulder of the legion’s new standard-bearer, comforting the young woman as she cried. Thalia was dressed in her usual black denim, various punk-band buttons gleaming on the lapel of her leather jacket. A silver circlet, the symbol of Artemis’s lieutenant, glinted in her spiky dark hair. Her sunken eyes and slumped shoulders made me suspect

that she already knew about Jason's death—perhaps had known for a while and had gone through a first hard wave of grieving.

I winced with guilt. I should have been the one to deliver the news about Jason. The cowardly part of me felt relieved that I didn't have to bear the initial brunt of Thalia's anger. The rest of me felt horrible that I felt relieved.

I needed to go talk to her. Then something caught my eye in the crowd checking out Diana's chariot. People were packed into its carriage tighter than New Year's Eve revelers in a stretch limo's sunroof. Among them was a lanky young woman with pink hair.

From my mouth escaped another completely inappropriate, delighted laugh. "Lavinia?"

She looked over and grinned. "This ride is *so* cool! I never want to get out."

Diana smiled. "Well, Lavinia Asimov, if you want to stay on board, you'd have to become a Hunter."

"Nope!" Lavinia hopped off as if the chariot's floorboards had become lava. "No offense, my lady, but I like girls too much to take that vow. Like… *like* them. Not just *like* them. Like—"

"I understand." Diana sighed. "Romantic love. It's a plague."

"Lavinia, h-how did you…" I stammered. "Where did you—?"

"This young woman," said Diana, "was responsible for the destruction of the Triumvirate's fleet."

"Well, I had a lot of help," Lavinia said.

"PEACHES!" said a muffled voice from somewhere in the chariot.

He was so short, I hadn't noticed him before, hidden as he was behind the carriage's sideboard and the crowd of big folk, but now Peaches squirmed and climbed his way to the top of the railing. He grinned his wicked grin. His diaper sagged. His leafy wings rustled. He beat his chest with his minuscule fists and looked very pleased with himself.

"Peaches!" Meg cried.

"PEACHES!" Peaches agreed, and he flew into Meg's arms. Never had there been such a bittersweet reunion between a girl and her deciduous fruit spirit. There were tears and laughter, hugs and scratches, and cries of "Peaches!" in every tone from scolding to apologetic to jubilant.

"I don't understand," I said, turning to Lavinia. "*You* made all those mortars malfunction?"

Lavinia looked offended. “Well, yeah. Somebody had to stop the fleet. I *did* pay attention during siege-weapon class and ship-boarding class. It wasn’t that hard. All it took was a little fancy footwork.”

Hazel finally managed to pick her jaw off the pavement. “Wasn’t that *hard*?”

“We were motivated! The fauns and dryads did great.” She paused, her expression momentarily clouding, as if she remembered something unpleasant. “Um…besides, the Nereids helped a lot. There was only a skeleton crew aboard each yacht. Not, like, actual skeletons, but—you know what I mean. Also, look!”

She pointed proudly at her feet, which were now adorned with the shoes of Terpsichore from Caligula’s private collection.

“You mounted an amphibious assault on an enemy fleet,” I said, “for a pair of shoes.”

Lavinia huffed. “Not just for the shoes, obviously.” She tap-danced a routine that would’ve made Savion Glover proud. “Also to save the camp, and the nature spirits, and Michael Kahale’s commandos.”

Hazel held up her hands to stop the overflow of information. “Wait. Not to be a killjoy—I mean, you did an amazing thing!—but you still deserted your post, Lavinia. I certainly didn’t give you permission—”

“I was acting on praetor’s orders,” Lavinia said haughtily. “In fact, Reyna helped. She was knocked out for a while, healing, but she woke up in time to instill us with the power of Bellona, right before we boarded those ships. Made us all strong and stealthy and stuff.”

“Reyna?” I yelped. “Where is she?”

“Right here,” called the praetor.

I didn’t know how I’d missed seeing her. She’d been hiding in plain sight among the group of survivors talking with Thalia. I suppose I’d been too focused on Thalia, wondering whether or not she was going to kill me and whether or not I deserved it.

Reyna limped over on crutches, her broken leg now in a full cast covered with signatures like *Felipe*, *Lotoya*, and *Sneezewart*. Considering all she’d been through, Reyna looked great, though she still had a hunk of hair missing from the raven attack, and her maroon sweater wrap was going to need a few days at the magical dry cleaner.

Thalia smiled, watching her friend come toward us. Then Thalia met my eyes, and her smile wavered. Her expression turned bleak. She gave me a

curt nod—not hostile, just sad, acknowledging that we had things to talk about later.

Hazel exhaled. “Thank the gods.” She gave Reyna a delicate hug, careful not to unbalance her. “Is it true about Lavinia acting on your orders?”

Reyna glanced at our pink-haired friend. The praetor’s pained expression said something like, *I respect you a lot, but I also hate you for being right.*

“Yes,” Reyna managed to say. “Plan L was my idea. Lavinia and her friends acted on my orders. They performed heroically.”

Lavinia beamed. “See? I told you.”

The assembled crowd murmured in amazement, as if, after a day full of wonders, they had finally witnessed something that could not be explained.

“There were many heroes today,” Diana said. “And many losses. I’m only sorry that Thalia and I couldn’t get here sooner. We were only able to rendezvous with Lavinia and Reyna’s forces after their raid, then destroy the second wave of undead, who were waiting in the sewers.” She waved dismissively, as if annihilating Tarquin’s main force of ghouls and zombies had been an afterthought.

Gods, I missed being a god.

“You also saved me,” I said. “You’re here. You’re actually *here*.”

She took my hand and squeezed it. Her flesh felt warm and human. I couldn’t remember the last time my sister had shown me such open affection.

“Let’s not celebrate quite yet,” she warned. “You have many wounded to attend to. The camp’s medics have set up tents outside the city. They will need every healer, including you, brother.”

Lavinia grimaced. “And we’ll have to have more funerals. Gods. I wish __”

“Look!” Hazel shrieked, her voice an octave higher than usual.

Arion came trotting up the hill, a hulking human form draped over his back.

“Oh, no.” My heart wilted. I had flashbacks of Tempest, the *ventus* horse, depositing Jason’s body on the beach in Santa Monica. No, I couldn’t watch. Yet I couldn’t look away.

The body on Arion’s back was unmoving and steaming. Arion stopped and the form slipped off one side. But it did not fall.

Frank Zhang landed on his feet. He turned toward us. His hair was singed to a fine black stubble. His eyebrows were gone. His clothes had

completely burned away except for his briefs and his praetor's cape, giving him a disturbing resemblance to Captain Underpants.

He looked around, his eyes glazed and unfocused.

"Hey, everybody," he croaked. Then he fell on his face.

40

Stop making me cry
Or buy me some new tear ducts
My old ones broke down

PRIORITIES CHANGE WHEN YOU'RE rushing a friend to emergency medical care.

It no longer seemed important that we had won a major battle, or that I could finally take *BECOME A ZOMBIE* off my alert calendar. Lavinia's heroism and her new dancing shoes were momentarily forgotten. My guilt about Thalia's presence was also pushed aside. She and I didn't exchange so much as a word as she rushed in to help along with all the rest of us.

I even failed to register that my sister, who'd been at my side only a moment before, had quietly vanished. I found myself barking orders at legionnaires, directing them to grate some unicorn horn, get me some nectar, stat, and rush, rush, rush Frank Zhang to the medical tent.

Hazel and I stayed at Frank's bedside until well past dawn, long after the other medics assured us he was out of danger. None of them could explain how he had survived, but his pulse was strong, his skin was remarkably unburned, and his lungs were clear. The arrow punctures in his shoulder and the dagger wound in his gut had given us some trouble, but they were now stitched up, bandaged, and healing well. Frank slept fitfully, muttering and flexing his hands as if he were still reaching for an imperial throat to strangle.

"Where's his firewood?" Hazel fretted. "Should we look for it? If it's lost in the—"

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I—I saw it burn up. That’s what killed Caligula. Frank’s sacrifice.”

“Then how…?” Hazel put her fist to her mouth to block a sob. She hardly dared to ask the question. “Will he be okay?”

I had no answer for her. Years ago, Juno had decreed that Frank’s life span was tied to that stick. I wasn’t there to hear her exact words—I try not to be around Juno any more than I have to. But she’d said something about Frank being powerful and bringing honor to his family, et cetera, though his life would be short and bright. The Fates had decreed that when that piece of tinder burned up, he was destined to die. Yet now the firewood was gone, and Frank still lived. After so many years keeping that piece of wood safe, he had intentionally burned it to…

“Maybe that’s it,” I muttered.

“What?” Hazel asked.

“He took control of his destiny,” I said. “The only other person I’ve ever known to have this, er, firewood problem, back in the old days, was this prince named Meleager. His mom got the same kind of prophecy when he was a baby. But she never even *told* Meleager about the firewood. She just hid it and let him live his life. He grew up to be kind of a privileged, arrogant brat.”

Hazel held Frank’s hand with both of hers. “Frank could never be like that.”

“I know,” I said. “Anyway, Meleager ended up killing a bunch of his relatives. His mom was horrified. She went and found the piece of firewood and threw it in the fire. Boom. End of story.”

Hazel shuddered. “That’s horrible.”

“The point is, Frank’s family was honest with him. His grandmother told him the story of Juno’s visit. She let him carry his own lifeline. She didn’t try to protect him from the hard truth. That shaped who he is.”

Hazel nodded slowly. “He knew what his fate would be. What his fate was *supposed* to be, anyway. I still don’t understand how—”

“It’s just a guess,” I admitted. “Frank went into that tunnel knowing he might die. He willingly sacrificed himself for a noble cause. In doing so, he broke free of his fate. By burning his own tinder, he kind of…I don’t know, started a new fire with it. He’s in charge of his own destiny now. Well, as much as any of us are. The only other explanation I can think of is that Juno somehow released him from the Fates’ decree.”

Hazel frowned. “Juno, doing someone a favor?”

“Doesn’t sound like her, I agree. She does have a soft spot for Frank, though.”

“She had a soft spot for Jason, too.” Hazel’s voice turned brittle. “Not that I’m complaining that Frank is alive, of course. It just seems…”

She didn’t need to finish. Frank’s survival was wonderful. A miracle. But somehow it made losing Jason feel all the more unfair and painful. As a former god, I knew all the usual responses to mortal complaints about the unfairness of dying. *Death is part of life. You have to accept it. Life would be meaningless without death. The deceased will always be alive as long as we remember them.* But as a mortal, as Jason’s friend, I didn’t find much comfort in those thoughts.

“Umph.” Frank’s eyes fluttered open.

“Oh!” Hazel wrapped her arms around his neck, smothering him in a hug. This wasn’t the best medical practice for someone just returning to consciousness, but I let it pass. Frank managed to pat Hazel feebly on the back.

“Breathe,” he croaked.

“Oh, sorry!” Hazel pulled away. She brushed a tear from her cheek. “You’re thirsty, I bet.” She rummaged for the canteen at his bedside and tipped it toward his mouth. He took a few painful sips of nectar.

“Ah.” He nodded his thanks. “So…are we…good?”

Hazel hiccupped a sob. “Yes. Yes, we’re good. The camp is saved. Tarquin is dead. And you…you killed Caligula.”

“Eh.” Frank smiled weakly. “That was my pleasure.” He turned to me. “Did I miss the cake?”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Your birthday. Yesterday.”

“Oh. I…I have to admit I completely forgot about that. And the cake.”

“So there might still be cake in our future. Good. Do you feel a year older, at least?”

“That’s a definite yes.”

“You scared me, Frank Zhang,” Hazel said. “You broke my heart when I thought…”

Frank’s expression turned sheepish (without him actually, you know, turning into a sheep). “I’m sorry, Hazel. It was just…” He curled his fingers, like he was trying to catch an elusive butterfly. “It was the only way. Ella

told me some prophecy lines, just for me…. Only fire could stop the emperors, kindled by the most precious firewood, on the bridge to camp. I guessed that she meant the Caldecott Tunnel. She said New Rome needed a new Horatius."

"Horatius Cocles," I recalled. "Nice guy. He defended Rome by holding off an entire army single-handedly on the Sublician Bridge."

Frank nodded. "I…I asked Ella not to tell anyone else. I just…I kind of had to process it, carry it around by myself for a while." His hand went instinctively to his belt line, where the cloth pouch no longer was.

"You could've died," Hazel said.

"Yeah. 'Life is only precious because it ends, kid.'"

"Is that a quote?" I asked.

"My dad," Frank said. "He was right. I just had to be willing to take the risk."

We remained quiet for a moment, considering the enormity of Frank's risk, or perhaps just marveling that Mars had actually said something wise.

"How did you survive the fire?" Hazel demanded.

"I don't know. I remember Caligula burning up. I passed out, thought I was dead. Then I woke up on Arion's back. And now I'm here."

"I'm glad." Hazel kissed his forehead tenderly. "But I'm still going to kill you later for scaring me like that."

He smiled. "That's fair. Could I have another…?"

Maybe he was going to say *kiss*, or *sip of nectar*, or *moment alone with my best friend, Apollo*. But before he could finish the thought, his eyes rolled up in his head and he started snoring.

Not all my bedside visits were so happy.

As the morning stretched on, I tried to visit as many of the wounded as I could.

Sometimes I could do nothing but watch as the bodies were prepared for an anti-zombie washing and final rites. Tarquin was gone, and his ghouls seemed to have dissolved with him, but no one wanted to take any chances.

Dakota, longtime centurion of the Fifth Legion, had died overnight from wounds he received fighting in the city. We decided by consensus that his funeral pyre would be Kool-Aid scented.

Jacob, the legion's former standard-bearer and my former archery student, had died at the Caldecott Tunnel when he took a direct hit from a

myrmeke's acidic spray. The magic golden eagle had survived, as magic items tend to do, but not Jacob. Terrel, the young woman who had snatched up the standard before it could hit the ground, had stayed at Jacob's side until he passed.

So many more had perished. I recognized their faces, even if I didn't know their names. I felt responsible for every single one. If I'd just done more, just acted more quickly, just been godlier…

My hardest visit was to Don the faun. He'd been brought in by a squad of Nereids who recovered him from the wreckage of the imperial yachts. Despite the danger, Don had stayed behind to make sure the sabotage was done right. Unlike what happened to Frank, the Greek fire explosions had ravaged poor Don. Most of the goat fur had burned away from his legs. His skin was charred. Despite the best healing music his fellow fauns could offer, and being covered with glistening healing goo, he must have been in terrible pain. Only his eyes were the same: bright and blue and jumping from spot to spot.

Lavinia knelt next to him, holding his left hand, which for some reason was the only part of him left unscathed. A group of dryads and fauns stood nearby, at a respectful distance, with Pranjal the healer, who had already done everything he could.

When Don saw me, he grimaced, his teeth speckled with bits of ash. "H-hey, Apollo. Got any…spare change?"

I blinked back tears. "Oh, Don. Oh, my sweet, stupid faun."

I knelt at his bedside, opposite Lavinia. I scanned the horrors of Don's condition, desperately hoping I could see something to fix, something the other medics had missed, but of course there was nothing. The fact Don had survived this long was a miracle.

"It's not so bad," Don rasped. "Doc gave me some stuff for the pain."

"Jarritos cherry soda," said Pranjal.

I nodded. That was powerful pain medicine indeed for satyrs and fauns, only to be used in the most serious of cases, lest the patients become addicted.

"I just…I wanted…" Don groaned, his eyes becoming brighter.

"Save your strength," I pleaded.

"For what?" He croaked a grotesque version of a laugh. "I wanted to ask: Does it hurt? Reincarnation?"

My eyes were too blurry to see properly. “I—I’ve never reincarnated, Don. When I became human, that was different, I think. But I hear reincarnation is peaceful. Beautiful.”

The dryads and fauns nodded and murmured in agreement, though their expressions betrayed a mixture of fear, sorrow, and desperation, making them not the best sales team for the Great Unknown.

Lavinia cupped her hands around the faun’s fingers. “You’re a hero, Don. You’re a great friend.”

“Hey…cool.” He seemed to have trouble locating Lavinia’s face. “I’m scared, Lavinia.”

“I know, babe.”

“I hope…maybe I come back as a hemlock? That would be like…an action-hero plant, right?”

Lavinia nodded, her lips quivering. “Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.”

“Cool…. Hey, Apollo, you—you know the difference between a faun and a satyr…?”

He smiled a little wider, as if ready to deliver the punchline. His face froze that way. His chest stopped moving. Dryads and fauns began to cry. Lavinia kissed the faun’s hand, then pulled a piece of bubble gum from her bag and reverently slipped it into Don’s shirt pocket.

A moment later, his body collapsed with a noise like a relieved sigh, crumbling into fresh loam. In the spot where his heart had been, a tiny sapling emerged from the soil. I immediately recognized the shape of those miniature leaves. Not a hemlock. A laurel—the tree I had created from poor Daphne, and whose leaves I had decided to make into wreaths. The laurel, the tree of victory.

One of the dryads glanced at me. “Did you do that…?”

I shook my head. I swallowed the bitter taste from my mouth.

“The only difference between a satyr and a faun,” I said, “is what we see in them. And what they see in themselves. Plant this tree somewhere special.” I looked up at the dryads. “Tend it and make it grow healthy and tall. This was Don the faun, a hero.”

41

If you hate me, fine
Just don't hit me in the gut
Or, well, anywhere

THE NEXT FEW DAYS were almost as hard as battle itself. War leaves a huge mess that cannot simply be addressed with a mop and a bucket.

We cleared the rubble and shored up the most precarious damaged buildings. We put out fires, both literal and figurative. Terminus had made it through the battle, though he was weak and shaken. His first announcement was that he was formally adopting little Julia. The girl seemed delighted, though I wasn't sure how Roman law would work out adoption-by-statue. Tyson and Ella were safely accounted for. Once Ella learned that I hadn't messed up the summoning after all, she announced that she and Tyson were going back to the bookstore to clean up the mess, finish the Sibylline Books, and feed the cat, not necessarily in that order. Oh, and she was also gratified Frank was alive. As for me…I got the feeling she was still making up her mind.

Peaches left us once more to go help the local dryads and fauns, but he promised us, "Peaches," which I took to mean that we would see him again soon.

With Thalia's help, Reyna somehow managed to find One Eye and Short Ears, the abused pegasi from the emperors' chariot. She talked to them in soothing tones, promised them healing, and convinced them to come back with her to camp, where she spent most of her time dressing their wounds and providing them with good food and plenty of open air. The animals

seemed to recognize that Reyna was a friend of their immortal forefather, the great Pegasus himself. After what they'd been through, I doubted they would have trusted anyone else to care for them.

We didn't count the dead. They weren't numbers. They were people we had known, friends we had fought with.

We lit the funeral pyres all on one night, at the base of Jupiter's temple, and shared the traditional feast for the dead to send our fallen comrades off to the Underworld. The Lares turned out in full force until the hillside was a glowing field of purple, ghosts outnumbering the living.

I noticed that Reyna stood back and let Frank officiate. Praetor Zhang had quickly regained his strength. Dressed in full armor and his maroon cloak, he gave his eulogy while the legionnaires listened with awed reverence, as one does when the speaker has recently sacrificed himself in a fiery explosion and then, somehow, made it out alive with his underwear and cape intact.

Hazel helped, too, going through the ranks and comforting those who were crying or looking shell-shocked. Reyna stayed at the edge of the crowd, leaning on her crutches, gazing wistfully at the legionnaires as if they were loved ones she hadn't seen in a decade and now barely recognized.

As Frank finished his speech, a voice next to me said, "Hey."

Thalia Grace wore her usual black and silver. In the light of the funeral pyres, her electric-blue eyes turned piercing violet. Over the past few days, we had spoken a few times, but it had all been surface talk: where to bring supplies, how to help the wounded. We had avoided *the subject*.

"Hey," I said, my voice hoarse.

She folded her arms and stared at the fire. "I don't blame you, Apollo. My brother…" She hesitated, steadying her breath. "Jason made his own choices. Heroes have to do that."

Somehow, having her not blame me only made me feel guiltier and more unworthy. Ugh, human emotions were like barbed wire. There was just no safe way to grab hold of them or get through them.

"I'm so sorry," I said at last.

"Yeah. I know." She closed her eyes as if listening for a distant sound—a wolf cry in the forest, perhaps. "I got Reyna's letter, a few hours before Diana received your summons. An aura—one of the breeze nymphs—she plucked it out of the mail and flew it to me personally. So dangerous for her, but she did it anyway." Thalia picked at one of the buttons on her lapel: Iggy

and the Stooges, a band older than she was by several generations. “We came as fast as we could, but still…I had some time to cry and scream and throw things.”

I remained very still. I had vivid memories of Iggy Pop throwing peanut butter, ice cubes, watermelons, and other dangerous objects at his fans during his concerts. I found Thalia more intimidating than him by far.

“It seems so cruel,” she continued. “We lose someone and finally get them back, only to lose them again.”

I wondered why she used the word *we*. She seemed to be saying that she and I shared this experience—the loss of an only sibling. But she had suffered so much worse. *My* sister couldn’t die. I couldn’t lose her permanently.

Then, after a moment of disorientation, like I’d been flipped upside down, I realized she wasn’t talking about me losing someone. She was talking about Artemis—Diana.

Was she suggesting that my sister missed me, even grieved for me as Thalia grieved for Jason?

Thalia must have read my expression. “The goddess has been beside herself,” she said. “I mean that literally. Sometimes she gets so worried she splits into two forms, Roman and Greek, right in front of me. She’ll probably get mad at me for telling you this, but she loves you more than anyone else in the world.”

A marble seemed to have lodged in my throat. I couldn’t speak, so I just nodded.

“Diana didn’t want to leave camp so suddenly like that,” Thalia continued. “But you know how it is. Gods can’t stick around. Once the danger to New Rome had passed, she couldn’t risk overstaying her summons. Jupiter…Dad wouldn’t approve.”

I shivered. How easy it was to forget that this young woman was *also* my sister. And Jason was my brother. At one time, I would have discounted that connection. *They’re just demigods,* I would have said. *Not* really *family.*

Now I found the idea hard to accept for a different reason. I didn’t feel worthy of that family. Or Thalia’s forgiveness.

Gradually, the funeral picnic began to break up. Romans drifted off in twos and threes, heading for New Rome, where a special nighttime meeting was being held at the Senate House. Sadly, the valley’s population was so

reduced that the entire legion and the citizenry of New Rome could now fit inside that one building.

Reyna hobbled over to us.

Thalia gave her a smile. “So, Praetor Ramírez-Arellano, you ready?”

“Yes.” Reyna answered without hesitation, though I wasn’t sure what she was ready for. “Do you mind if…” She nodded at me.

Thalia gripped her friend’s shoulder. “Of course. See you at the Senate House.” She strode away into the darkness.

“Come on, Lester.” Reyna winked. “Limp with me.”

The limping was easy. Even though I was healed, I tired easily. It was no problem to walk at Reyna’s pace. Her dogs, Aurum and Argentum, weren’t with her, I noticed, perhaps because Terminus didn’t approve of deadly weapons inside the city limits.

We made our way slowly down the road from Temple Hill toward New Rome. Other legionnaires gave us a wide berth, apparently sensing we had private business to discuss.

Reyna kept me in suspense until we reached the bridge spanning the Little Tiber.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said.

Her smile was a ghost of the one she’d had on the hillside of Sutro Tower, when I’d offered to be her boyfriend. That left me in no doubt as to what she meant—not *Thank you for helping to save the camp*, but *Thank you for giving me a good laugh*.

“No problem,” I grumbled.

“I don’t mean it in a negative way.” Seeing my dubious look, she sighed and stared out at the dark river, its ripples curling silver in the moonlight. “I don’t know if I can explain this. My whole life, I’ve been living with other people’s expectations of what I’m supposed to be. *Be this. Be that.* You know?”

“You’re talking to a former god. Dealing with people’s expectations is our job description.”

Reyna conceded this with a nod. “For years, I was supposed to be a good little sister to Hylla in a tough family situation. Then, on Calypso’s island, I was supposed to be an obedient servant. Then I was a pirate for a while. Then a legionnaire. Then a praetor.”

“You do have an impressive résumé,” I admitted.

“But the whole time I’ve been a leader here,” she forged on, “I was looking for a partner. Praetors often partner up. In power. But also romantically, I mean. I thought Jason. Then for a hot minute, Percy Jackson. Gods help me, I even considered Octavian.” She shuddered. “Everybody was always trying to ship me with somebody. Thalia. Jason. Gwen. Even Frank. *Oh, you’d be perfect together! That’s who you need!* But I was never really sure if I *wanted* that, or if I just felt like I was *supposed* to want it. People, well-meaning, would be like, *Oh, you poor thing. You deserve somebody in your life. Date him. Date her. Date whoever. Find your soul mate.*”

She looked at me to see if I was following. Her words came out hot and fast, as if she’d been holding them in for a long time. “And that meeting with Venus. That *really* messed me up. *No demigod will heal your heart.* What was *that* supposed to mean? Then finally, you came along.”

“Do we have to review that part again? I am quite embarrassed enough.”

“But you *showed* me. When you proposed dating…” She took a deep breath, her body shaking with silent giggles. “Oh, gods. I saw how ridiculous I’d been. How ridiculous the whole situation was. That’s what healed my heart—being able to laugh at myself again, at my stupid ideas about destiny. That allowed me to break free—just like Frank broke free of his firewood. I don’t need another person to heal my heart. I don’t need a partner…at least, not until and unless I’m ready on my own terms. I don’t need to be force-shipped with anyone or wear anybody else’s label. For the first time in a long time, I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome?”

She laughed. “Don’t you see, though? Venus put you up to the job. She tricked you into it, because she knew you are the only one in the cosmos with an ego big enough to handle the rejection. I could laugh in your face, and you would heal.”

“Hmph.” I suspected she was right about Venus manipulating me. I wasn’t so sure the goddess cared whether or not I would heal, though. “So what does this mean for you, exactly? What’s next for Praetor Reyna?”

Even as I asked the question, I realized I knew the answer.

“Come along to the Senate House,” she said. “We’ve got a few surprises in store.”

42

Life is uncertain
Accept presents, and always
Eat your birthday cake

MY FIRST SURPRISE: A front-row seat.

Meg and I were given places of honor next to the senior senators, and the most important citizens of New Rome, and those demigods with accessibility needs. When Meg saw me, she patted the bench next to her, as if there were any other place to sit. The chamber was absolutely packed. Somehow, it was reassuring to see everyone together, even if the populace was much reduced and the sea of white bandages could have caused snow blindness.

Reyna limped into the chamber right behind me. The entire assembly came to its feet. They waited in respectful silence as she made her way to her praetor's seat next to Frank, who nodded at his colleague.

Once she was seated, everyone else followed suit.

Reyna gestured at Frank like, *Let the fun begin.*

"So," Frank addressed the audience, "I call to order this extraordinary meeting of the people of New Rome and the Twelfth Legion. First item on the agenda: a formal thank-you to all. We survived by a team effort. We've dealt a huge blow to our enemies. Tarquin is dead—*really* dead at last. Two out of three emperors of the Triumvirate have been destroyed, along with their fleet and their troops. This was done at great cost. But you all acted like true Romans. We live to see another day!"

There was applause, some nods, and a few cheers of “Yes!” and “Another day!” One guy in the back, who must not have been paying attention for the last week said, *“Tarquin?”*

“Second,” Frank said, “I want to reassure you that I’m alive and well.” He patted his chest as if to prove it. “My fate is no longer tied to a piece of wood, which is nice. And if you would all please forget that you saw me in my underwear, I’d appreciate it.”

That got some laughs. Who knew Frank could be funny on purpose?

“Now…” His expression turned serious. “It’s our duty to inform you of some personnel changes. Reyna?”

He watched her quizzically, as if wondering whether she would really go through with it.

“Thank you, Frank.” She pulled herself to her feet. Again, everyone in the assembly who could stand did.

“Guys. Please.” She gestured for us to be seated. “This is hard enough.”

When we were all settled, she scanned the faces in the crowd: a lot of anxious, sad expressions. I suspected many people knew what was coming.

“I’ve been praetor a long time,” Reyna said. “It’s been an honor to serve the legion. We’ve been through some rough times together. Some… interesting years.”

A bit of nervous laughter. *Interesting* was the perfect curse word.

“But it’s time for me to step down,” she continued. “So I am resigning my post as praetor.”

A moan of disbelief filled the chamber, as if homework had just been assigned on a Friday afternoon.

“It’s for personal reasons,” Reyna said. “Like, my sanity, for instance. I need time just to be Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano, to find out who I am outside the legion. It may take a few years, or decades, or centuries. And so…” She removed her praetor’s cloak and badge and handed them to Frank.

“Thalia?” she called.

Thalia Grace made her way down the central aisle. She winked at me as she passed.

She stood before Reyna and said, “Repeat after me: *I pledge myself to the goddess Diana. I turn my back on the company of men, accept eternal maidenhood, and join the hunt.”*

Reyna repeated the words. Nothing magical happened that I could see: no thunder or lightning, no silver glitter falling from the ceiling. But Reyna

looked as if she'd been given a new lease on life, which she had—infinity years, with zero interest and no money down.

Thalia clasped her shoulder. "Welcome to the hunt, sister!"

Reyna grinned. "Thanks." She faced the crowd. "And thank you, all. Long live Rome!"

The crowd rose again and gave Reyna a standing ovation. They cheered and stomped with such jubilation I was afraid the duct-taped dome might collapse on us.

Finally, when Reyna was seated in the front row with her new leader, Thalia (having taken the seats of two senators who were more than happy to move), everyone turned their attention back to Frank.

"Well, guys"—he spread his arms—"I could thank Reyna all day long. She has given so much to the legion. She's been the best mentor and friend. She can never be replaced. On the other hand, I'm up here all alone now, and we have an empty praetor's chair. So I'd like to take nominations for—"

Lavinia started the chant: "HA-ZEL! HA-ZEL!"

The crowd quickly joined in. Hazel's eyes widened. She tried to resist when those sitting around her pulled her to her feet, but her Fifth Cohort fan club had evidently been preparing for this possibility. One of them produced a shield, which they hoisted Hazel onto like a saddle. They raised her overhead and marched her to the middle of the senate floor, turning her around and chanting, "HAZEL! HAZEL!" Reyna clapped and yelled right along with them. Only Frank tried to remain neutral, though he had to hide his smile behind his fist.

"Okay, settle down!" he called at last. "We have one nomination. Are there any other—?"

"HAZEL! HAZEL!"

"Any objections?"

"HAZEL! HAZEL!"

"Then I recognize the will of the Twelfth Legion. Hazel Levesque, you are hereby promoted to praetor!"

More wild cheering. Hazel looked dazed as she was dressed in Reyna's old cloak and badge of office, then led to her chair.

Seeing Frank and Hazel side by side, I had to smile. They looked so *right* together—wise and strong and brave. The perfect praetors. Rome's future was in good hands.

“Thank you,” Hazel managed at last. “I—I’ll do everything I can to be worthy of your trust. Here’s the thing, though. This leaves the Fifth Cohort without a centurion, so—”

The entire Fifth Cohort started chanting in unison: “LAVINIA! LAVINIA!”

“What?” Lavinia’s face turned pinker than her hair. “Oh, no. I don’t do leadership!”

“LAVINIA! LAVINIA!”

“Is this a joke? Guys, I—”

“Lavinia Asimov!” Hazel said with a smile. “The Fifth Cohort read my mind. As my first act as praetor, for your unparalleled heroism in the Battle of San Francisco Bay, I hereby promote you to centurion—unless my fellow praetor has any objections?”

“None,” Frank said.

“Then come forward, Lavinia!”

To more applause and whistling, Lavinia approached the rostrum and got her new badge of office. She hugged Frank and Hazel, which wasn’t the usual military protocol, but no one seemed to care. Nobody clapped louder or whistled more shrilly than Meg. I know because she left me deaf in one ear.

“Thanks, guys,” Lavinia announced. “So, Fifth Cohort, first we’re going to learn to tap-dance. Then—”

“Thank you, Centurion,” Hazel said. “You may be seated.”

“What? I’m not kidding—”

“On to our next order of business!” Frank said, as Lavinia skipped grumpily (if that’s even possible) back to her seat. “We realize the legion will need time to heal. There’s lots to be done. This summer we will rebuild. We’ll speak to Lupa about getting more recruits as quickly as possible, so we can come back from this battle stronger than ever. But for now, our fight is won, and we have to honor two people who made that possible: Apollo, otherwise known as Lester Papadopoulos, and his comrade, Meg McCaffrey!”

The crowd applauded so much, I doubt many people heard Meg say, “Master, not comrade,” which was fine with me.

As we stood to accept the legion’s thanks, I felt strangely uncomfortable. Now that I finally had a friendly crowd cheering for me, I just wanted to sit down and cover my head with a toga. I had done so little compared to Hazel

or Reyna or Frank, not to mention all those who had died: Jason, Dakota, Don, Jacob, the Sibyl, Harpocrates…dozens more.

Frank raised his hand for quiet. “Now, I know you two have another long, hard quest ahead of you. There’s still one emperor who needs his *podex* kicked.”

As the crowd chuckled, I wished our next task would be as easy as Frank made it sound. Nero’s podex, yes…but there was also the small matter of Python, my old immortal enemy, presently squatting in my old holy place of Delphi.

“And I understand,” Frank continued, “that you two have decided to leave in the morning.”

“We *have*?” My voice cracked. I’d been imagining a week or two relaxing in New Rome, enjoying the thermal baths, maybe seeing a chariot race.

“Shh,” Meg told me. “Yes, we’ve decided.”

That didn’t make me feel any better.

“Also,” Hazel chimed in, “I know you two are planning to visit Ella and Tyson at dawn to receive prophetic help for the next stage of your quest.”

“We *are*?” I yelped. All I could think of was Aristophanes licking his nether regions.

“But tonight,” Frank said, “we want to honor what you two have done for this camp. Without your help, Camp Jupiter might not still be here. So we would like to present you with these gifts.”

From the back of the room, Senator Larry came down the aisle carrying a big equipment bag. I wondered if the legion had bought us a ski vacation at Lake Tahoe. Larry reached the rostrum and set down the duffel. He rummaged out the first gift and handed it to me with a grin. “It’s a new bow!”

Larry had missed his calling as a game-show announcer.

My first thought: *Oh, cool. I need a new bow.*

Then I looked more carefully at the weapon in my hands, and I squealed in disbelief. “This is mine!”

Meg snorted. “Of course it is. They just gave it to you.”

“No, I mean it’s *mine* mine! Originally mine, from when I was a god!”

I held up the bow for all to ooh and ahh at: a masterpiece of golden oak, carved with gilded vines that flashed in the light as if on fire. Its taut curve hummed with power. If I remembered correctly, the bowstring was woven

from Celestial bronze and threads from the looms of the Fates (which… gosh, where did those come from? I certainly didn't steal them). The bow weighed almost nothing.

"That has been in the principia treasure room for centuries," Frank said. "No one can wield it. It's too heavy to draw. Believe me, I would have if I could have. Since it was originally a gift from you to the legion, it seemed only right we give it back. With your godly strength returning, we figured you could put it to good use."

I didn't know what to say. Usually I was against re-gifting, but in this case, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I couldn't remember when or why I'd given the legion this bow—for centuries, I'd passed them out like party favors—but I was certainly glad to have it back. I drew the string with no trouble at all. Either my strength was godlier than I realized, or the bow recognized me as its rightful owner. Oh, yes. I could do some damage with this beauty.

"Thank you," I said.

Frank smiled. "I'm just sorry we didn't have any replacement combat ukuleles in storage."

From the bleachers, Lavinia grumbled, "After I went and fixed it for him, too."

"But," Hazel said, carefully ignoring her new centurion, "we do have a gift for Meg."

Larry rummaged through his Santa bag again. He pulled out a black silk pouch about the size of a deck of playing cards. I resisted the urge to shout, *HA! My gift is bigger!*

Meg peeked in the pouch and gasped. "Seeds!"

That would not have been my reaction, but she seemed genuinely delighted.

Leila, daughter of Ceres, called out from the stands, "Meg, those are very ancient. We all got together, the camp's gardeners, and collected them for you from our greenhouse storage bins. Honestly, I'm not even sure what they'll all grow into, but you should have fun finding out! I hope you can use them against the last emperor."

Meg looked at a loss for words. Her lip quivered. She nodded and blinked her thanks.

"Okay, then!" Frank said. "I know we ate at the funeral, but we need to celebrate Hazel's and Lavinia's promotions, wish Reyna the best on her new

adventures, and wish Apollo and Meg good-bye. And, of course, we've got a belated birthday cake for Lester! Party in the mess hall!"

43

Our great opening!
Win a free Inferno trip!
And take a cupcake!

I DON'T KNOW WHICH good-bye was hardest.

At first light, Hazel and Frank met us at the coffee shop for one final thank-you. Then they were off to rouse the legion. They intended to get right to work on repairs to the camp to take everyone's minds off the many losses before shock could set in. Watching them walk away together down the Via Praetoria, I felt a warm certainty that the legion was about to see a new golden age. Like Frank, the Twelfth Legion Fulminata would rise from the ashes, though hopefully wearing more than just their undergarments.

Minutes later, Thalia and Reyna came by with their pack of gray wolves, their metal greyhounds, and their pair of rescue pegasi. Their departure saddened me as much as my sister's, but I understood their ways, those Hunters. Always on the move.

Reyna gave me one last hug. "I'm looking forward to a long vacation."

Thalia laughed. "Vacation? RARA, I hate to tell you, but we've got hard work ahead! We've been tracking the Teumessian Fox across the Midwest for months now, and it hasn't been going well."

"Exactly," Reyna said. "A vacation." She kissed Meg on the top of her head. "You keep Lester in line, okay? Don't let him get a big head just because he's got a nice new bow."

"You can count on me," Meg said.

Sadly, I had no reason to doubt her.

When Meg and I left the café for the last time, Bombilo actually cried. Behind his gruff exterior, the two-headed barista turned out to be a real sentimentalist. He gave us a dozen scones, a bag of coffee beans, and told us to get out of his sight before he started bawling again. I took charge of the scones. Meg, gods help me, took the coffee.

At the gates of camp, Lavinia waited, chewing her bubble gum while she polished her new centurion badge. “This is the earliest I’ve been up in years,” she complained. “I’m going to hate being an officer.”

The sparkle in her eyes told a different story.

“You’ll do great,” Meg said.

As Lavinia bent to hug her, I noticed a stippled rash running down Ms. Asimov’s left cheek and neck, unsuccessfully covered by some foundation.

I cleared my throat. “Did you perhaps sneak out last night to see Poison Oak?”

Lavinia blushed adorably. “Well? I’m told that my centurionship makes me *very* attractive.”

Meg looked concerned. “You’re going to have to invest in some calamine lotion if you keep seeing her.”

“Hey, no relationship is perfect,” Lavinia said. “At least with her, I know the problems right up front! We’ll figure it out.”

I had no doubt she would. She hugged me and ruffled my hair. “You’d better come back and see me. And don’t die. I will kick your butt with my new dancing shoes if you die.”

“Understood,” I said.

She did one last soft-shoe routine, gestured to us like, *Over to you,* then raced off to muster the Fifth Cohort for a long day of tap-dancing.

Watching her go, I marveled at how much had happened to all of us since Lavinia Asimov first escorted us into camp, just a few days before. We had defeated two emperors and a king, which would have been a strong hand in even the most cutthroat poker game. We had put to rest the souls of a god and a Sibyl. We had saved a camp, a city, and a lovely pair of shoes. Most of all, I had seen my sister, and she had restored me to good health—or what passed for good health for Lester Papadopoulos. As Reyna might say, we had added quite a bit to our “good things” column. Now Meg and I were embarking on what might be our last quest with good expectations and hopeful spirits…or at least a good night’s sleep and a dozen scones.

We took one final trip into New Rome, where Tyson and Ella were expecting us. Over the entrance of the bookstore, a newly painted sign proclaimed CYCLOPS BOOKS.

"Yay!" Tyson cried as we came through the doorway. "Come in! We are having our great opening today!"

"*Grand* opening," Ella corrected, fussing over a platter of cupcakes and a bunch of balloons at the information desk. "Welcome to Cyclops Books and Prophecies and Also an Orange Cat."

"That wouldn't all fit on the sign," Tyson confided.

"It should have fit on the sign," Ella said. "We need a bigger sign."

On top of the old-fashioned cash register, Aristophanes yawned as if it was all the same to him. He was wearing a tiny party hat and an expression that said, *I am only wearing this because demigods don't have phone cameras or Instagram.*

"Customers can get prophecies for their quests!" Tyson explained, pointing at his chest, which was covered even more densely with Sibylline verse. "They can pick up the latest books, too!"

"I recommend the 1924 *Farmer's Almanac*," Ella told us. "Would you like a copy?"

"Ah…maybe next time," I said. "We were told you had a prophecy for us?"

"Yep, yep." Ella ran her finger down Tyson's ribs, scanning for the correct lines.

The Cyclops squirmed and giggled.

"Here," Ella said. "Over his spleen."

Wonderful, I thought. The Prophecy of Tyson's Spleen.

Ella read aloud:

"O son of Zeus the final challenge face
The tow'r of Nero two alone ascend
Dislodge the beast that hast usurped thy place."

I waited.

Ella nodded. "Yep, yep, yep. That's it." She went back to her cupcakes and balloons.

"That can't be it," I complained. "That makes no poetic sense. It's not a haiku. It's not a sonnet. It's not…Oh."

Meg squinted at me. "Oh, what?"

“Oh, as in *Oh, no.*” I remembered a dour young man I’d met in medieval Florence. It had been a long time ago, but I never forgot someone who invented a new type of poetry. “It’s terza rima.”

“Who?” Meg asked.

“It’s a style Dante invented. In *The Inferno.* Three lines. The first and the third line rhyme. The middle line rhymes with first line of the *next* stanza.”

“I don’t get it,” Meg said.

“I want a cupcake,” Tyson announced.

“*Face* and *place* rhyme,” I told Meg. “The middle line ends with *ascend*. That tells us that when we find the next stanza, we’ll know it’s correct if the first line and third lines rhyme with *ascend*. Terza rima is like an endless paper chain of stanzas, all linked together.”

Meg frowned. “But there *isn’t* a next stanza.”

“Not here,” I agreed. “Which means it must be somewhere out there….” I waved vaguely to the east. “We’re on a scavenger hunt for more stanzas. This is just the starting point.”

“Hmph.”

As always, Meg had summarized our predicament perfectly. It was very much *hmph*. I also did not like the fact that our new prophecy’s rhyme scheme had been invented to describe a descent into hell.

“‘The tower of Nero,’” Ella said, repositioning her balloon display. “New York, I bet. Yep.”

I suppressed a whimper.

The harpy was right. We would need to return to where my problems began—Manhattan, where the gleaming Triumvirate headquarters rose from downtown. After that, I would have to face the beast who had usurped my place. I suspected that line didn’t mean Nero’s alter ego, *the Beast,* but the actual beast Python, my ancient enemy. How I could reach him in his lair at Delphi, much less defeat him, I had no idea.

“New York.” Meg clenched her jaw.

I knew this would be the worst of homecomings for her, back to her stepfather’s house of horrors, where she’d been emotionally abused for years. I wished I could spare her the pain, but I suspected she’d always known this day would come, and like most of the pain she had gone through, there was no choice but to…well, go through it.

“Okay,” she said, her voice resolute. “How do we get there?”

“Oh! Oh!” Tyson raised his hand. His mouth was coated in cupcake frosting. “I would take a rocket ship!”

I stared at him. “Do you *have* a rocket ship?”

His expression deflated. “No.”

I looked out the bookstore’s picture windows. In the distance, the sun rose over Mount Diablo. Our journey of thousands of miles could not begin with a rocket ship, so we’d have to find another way. Horses? Eagles? A self-driving car that was programmed not to fly off highway overpasses? We’d have to trust in the gods for some good luck. (Insert *HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA* here.) And maybe, if we were very fortunate, we could at least call on our old friends at Camp Half-Blood once we returned to New York. That thought gave me courage.

“Come on, Meg,” I said. “We’ve got a lot of miles to cover. We need to find a new ride.”

GUIDE TO APOLLO-SPEAK

ab urbe condita Latin for *from the founding of the city*. For a time, Romans used the acronym AUC to mark the years since the founding of Rome.

Achilles a Greek hero of the Trojan War; a nearly invulnerable warrior who slayed the Trojan hero Hector outside the walls of Troy and then dragged his corpse behind his chariot

Aphrodite the Greek goddess of love and beauty. Roman form: Venus

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars

Argentum Latin for *silver*; the name of one of Reyna's two automaton greyhounds that can detect lying

Argo II a flying trireme built by the Hephaestus cabin at Camp Half-Blood to take the demigods of the Prophecy of Seven to Greece

Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Apollo. Roman form: Diana

Asclepius the god of medicine; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing center of ancient Greece

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom. Roman form: Minerva

aura (***aurae***, pl.) wind spirit

Aurum Latin for *gold*; the name of one of Reyna's two automaton greyhounds that can detect lying

ave Latin for *hail*, a Roman greeting

Bacchus the Roman god of wine and revelry; son of Jupiter. Greek form: Dionysus

ballista (**ballistae**, pl.) a Roman missile siege weapon that launches a large projectile at a distant target

Bellona a Roman goddess of war; daughter of Jupiter and Juno

Benito Mussolini an Italian politician who became the leader of the National Fascist Party, a paramilitary organization. He ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943, first as a prime minister and then as a dictator.

blemmyae a tribe of headless people with faces in their chests

Britomartis the Greek goddess of hunting and fishing nets; her sacred animal is the griffin

Burning Maze a magical, puzzle-filled underground labyrinth in Southern California controlled by the Roman emperor Caligula and Medea, a Greek sorceress

cacaseca dried poop

Caldecott Tunnel a four-lane highway that cuts through the Berkeley Hills and connects Oakland and Orinda, California. It contains a secret middle tunnel, guarded by Roman soldiers, that leads to Camp Jupiter.

Caligula the nickname of the third of Rome's emperors, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, infamous for his cruelty and carnage during the four years he ruled, from 37 to 41 CE; he was assassinated by his own guard

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located in Long Island, New York

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located in California, between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills

Celestial bronze a powerful magical metal used to create weapons wielded by Greek gods and their demigod children

centurion an officer in the Roman army

charmspeak a rare type of hypnotism power that chosen children of Aphrodite possess

Cicero a Roman statesman who was renowned for his public speeches

Circus Maximus a stadium designed for horse and chariot racing

cloaca maxima Latin for *greatest sewer*

clunis Latin for *buttocks*

cohort groups of legionnaires

Colosseum an elliptical amphitheater built for gladiator fights, monster simulations, and mock naval battles

Commodus Lucius Aurelius Commodus was the son of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; he became co-emperor when he was sixteen and emperor at eighteen, when his father died; he ruled from 177 to 192 CE and was megalomaniacal and corrupt; he considered himself the New Hercules and enjoyed killing animals and fighting gladiators at the Colosseum

Cumaean Sibyl an Oracle of Apollo from Cumae who collected her prophetic instructions for averting disaster in nine volumes but destroyed six of them when trying to sell them to Tarquinius Superbus of Rome

Cyclops (**Cyclopes**, pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

cynocephalus (**cynocephali**, pl.) a being with a human body and a dog's head

Dante an Italian poet of the late Middle Ages who invented terza rima; author of *The Divine Comedy*, among other works

Daphne a beautiful naiad who attracted Apollo's attention; she transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape him

decimation the ancient Roman punishment for bad legions in which every tenth soldier was killed whether they were guilty or innocent

Delos a Greek island in the Aegean Sea near Mykonos; birthplace of Apollo

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos. Roman form: Ceres

denarius (**denarii**, pl.) a unit of Roman currency

Diana the Roman goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Jupiter and Leto, and the twin of Apollo. Greek form: Artemis

Dionysus Greek god of wine and revelry; the son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus

dryad a spirit (usually female) associated with a certain tree

Eagle of the Twelfth the standard of Camp Jupiter, a gold icon of an eagle on top of a pole, symbolizing the god Jupiter

Earthborn a race of six-armed giants, also called Gegenes

Elysium the paradise to which Greek heroes are sent when the gods grant them immortality

Erythraean Sibyl a prophetess who presided over Apollo's Oracle at Erythrae in Ionia

eurynomos (**eurynomoi**, pl.) a corpse-eating ghoul that lives in the Underworld and is controlled by Hades; the slightest cut from their claws causes a wasting disease in mortals, and when their victims die, they rise again as *vrykolakai*, or zombies. If a eurynomos manages to devour the flesh of a corpse down to the bones, the skeleton will become a fierce undead warrior, many of whom serve as Hades's elite palace guards.

Euterpe the Greek goddess of lyric poetry; one of the Nine Muses; daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne

fasces a ceremonial ax wrapped in a bundle of thick wooden rods with its crescent-shaped blade projecting outward; the ultimate symbol of authority in ancient Rome; origin of the word *fascism*

Fates three female personifications of destiny. They control the thread of life for every living thing from birth to death.

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man

Faunus the Roman god of the Wild. Greek form: Pan

Field of Mars part battlefield, part party zone, the place where drills and war games are held at Camp Jupiter

First Titan War also known as the Titanomachy, the eleven-year conflict between the Titans from Mount Othrys and the younger gods, whose future home would be Mount Olympus

Forum the center of life in New Rome; a plaza with statues and fountains that is lined with shops and nighttime entertainment venues

fuerte Spanish for *strong*

fulminata armed with lightning; a Roman legion under Julius Caesar whose emblem was a lightning bolt (*fulmen*)

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; wife of Ouranos; mother of the Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters

Gamelion the seventh month of the Attic or Athenian calendar that was used in Attica, Greece, at one time; roughly equivalent to January/February on the Gregorian calendar

Germani bodyguards for the Roman Empire from the Gaulish and Germanic tribes

Greek fire a magical, highly explosive, viscous green liquid used as a weapon; one of the most dangerous substances on earth

Grove of Dodona the site of the oldest Greek Oracle, second only to Delphi in importance; the rustling of trees in the grove provided answers to priests and priestesses who journeyed to the site. The grove is located in Camp Half-Blood Forest and accessible only through the myrmekes' lair.

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; ruler of the Underworld. Roman form: Pluto

Harpocrates the Ptolemaic god of silence and secrets, a Greek adaptation of Harpa-Khruti, Horus the Child, who was often depicted in art and statuary with his finger held up to his lips, a gesture symbolizing childhood

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hecate the goddess of magic and crossroads

Hector a Trojan champion who was ultimately slain by the Greek warrior Achilles and then dragged by the heels behind Achilles's chariot

Helios the Titan god of the sun; son of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire, including volcanic, and of crafts and blacksmithing; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister; Apollo's stepmother. Roman form: Juno

Hermes the Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Roman form: Mercury.

hippocampus a sea creature with a horse's head and a fish's body

Horatius Cocles a Roman officer who, according to legend, single-handedly defended the Sublician Bridge over the Tiber River from the invading Etruscan army

Hyacinthus a Greek hero and Apollo's lover, who died while trying to impress Apollo with his discus skills

immortuos Latin for *undead*

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Iris Greek goddess of the rainbow

jiangshi Chinese for *zombie*

Julius Caesar a Roman politician and general whose military accomplishments extended Rome's territory and ultimately led to a civil war that enabled him to assume control of the government in 49 BCE. He was declared "dictator for life" and went on to institute social reforms that angered some powerful Romans. A group of senators conspired against him and assassinated him on March 15, 44 BCE.

Juno the Roman goddess of marriage; Jupiter's wife and sister; Apollo's stepmother. Greek form: Hera

Jupiter the Roman god of the sky and king of the gods. Greek form: Zeus

Jupiter Optimus Maximus Latin for *Jupiter, the best and greatest god*

Khromanda (**Khromandae**, pl.) a humanoid monster with gray eyes, a shaggy blond pelt, and doglike teeth; it can only communicate in loud shrieks

Koronis daughter of a king; one of Apollo's girlfriends, who fell in love with another man. A white raven Apollo had left to guard her informed him of the affair. Apollo was so angry at the raven for failing to peck out the man's eyes that he cursed the bird, scorching its feathers. Apollo sent his sister, Artemis, to kill Koronis, because he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Kronos the Titan lord of time, evil, and the harvest. He is the youngest but boldest and most devious of Gaea's children; he convinced several of his brothers to aid him in the murder of their father, Ouranos. He was also Percy Jackson's primary opponent. Roman form: Saturn

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur

lamia Roman term for *zombie*

Lar (***Lares***, pl.) Roman house gods

legionnaire a member of the Roman army

Lemurian from the ancient continent of Lemuria, now lost, but once thought to be located in the Indian Ocean

Leto mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood

libri Latin for *books*

lictor an officer who carried a fasces and acted as a bodyguard for Roman officials

Little Tiber named after the Tiber River of Rome, the smaller river that forms the barrier of Camp Jupiter

Luna the moon Titan. Greek form: Selene

Lupa the wolf goddess, guardian spirit of Rome

maenad a female follower of Dionysus/Bacchus, often associated with frenzy

manubalista a Roman heavy crossbow

Mars the Roman god of war. Greek form: Ares

Medea a Greek enchantress, daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis and granddaughter of the Titan sun god, Helios; wife of the hero Jason, whom she helped obtain the Golden Fleece

Meleager a prince who the Fates predicted would die when a piece of firewood was consumed. When his mother discovered that Meleager had killed her two brothers, she threw the wood into the fire, bringing about his death.

Meliai Greek nymphs of the ash tree, born of Gaea; they nurtured and raised Zeus in Crete

Mercury the Roman god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Greek form: Hermes

Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena

Mist a magical force that prevents mortals from seeing gods, mythical creatures, and supernatural occurrences by replacing them with things the human mind can comprehend

Mount Olympus home of the Twelve Olympians

Mount Othrys a mountain in central Greece; the Titans' base during the ten-year war between the Titans and the Olympians; the seat of the Titans in Marin County, California; known by mortals as Mount Tamalpais

Mount Vesuvius a volcano near the Bay of Naples in Italy that erupted in the year 79 CE, burying the Roman city of Pompeii under ash

muster a formal assembly of troops

myrmeke a giant antlike creature the size of a full-grown German shepherd. Myrmekes live in enormous anthills, where they store shiny loot, like

gold. They spit poison and have nearly invincible body armor and vicious mandibles.

naiad a female water spirit

Nereid a spirit of the sea

Nero ruled as Roman Emperor from 54 to 58 CE; he had his mother and his first wife put to death; many believe he was responsible for setting a fire that gutted Rome, but he blamed the Christians, whom he burned on crosses; he built an extravagant new palace on the cleared land and lost support when construction expenses forced him to raise taxes; he committed suicide

New Rome both the valley in which Camp Jupiter is located and a city—a smaller, modern version of the imperial city—where Roman demigods can go to live in peace, study, and retire

Nine Muses goddesses who grant inspiration for and protect artistic creation and expression; daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne; as children, they were taught by Apollo. Their names are: Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Ourania, and Calliope.

nuntius Latin for *messenger*

nymph a female deity who animates nature

Oliver Cromwell a devout Puritan and influential political figure who led the parliamentary army during the English Civil War

Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo

Ouranos the Greek personification of the sky; husband of Gaea; father of the Titans

Pan the Greek god of the Wild; the son of Hermes. Roman form: Faunus

pandos (**pandai**, pl.) a man with gigantic ears, eight fingers and toes, and a body covered with hair that starts out white and turns black with age

People's Park a property located off Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, California, that was the site of a major confrontation between student protestors and police in May 1969

Phlegethon the River of Fire in the Underworld

Pluto the Roman god of death and ruler of the Underworld. Greek form: Hades

Pomerian Line the border of Rome

Pompeii a Roman city that was destroyed in 79 CE when the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried it under ash

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and the brother of Zeus and Hades. Roman form: Neptune

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

praetorium the living quarters for the praetors at Camp Jupiter

princeps Latin for *first citizen* or *first in line*; the early Roman emperors adopted this title for themselves, and it came to mean *prince of Rome*

principia the military headquarters for the praetors at Camp Jupiter

probatio the rank assigned to new members of the legion at Camp Jupiter

Ptolemaic relating to the Greco-Egyptian kings who ruled Egypt from 323 to 30 BCE

Python a monstrous dragon that Gaea appointed to guard the Oracle at Delphi

River Styx the river that forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld

Romulus a demigod son of Mars, twin brother of Remus; first king of Rome, who founded the city in 753 BCE

Saturnalia an ancient Roman festival held in December in honor of the god Saturn, the Roman equivalent of Kronos

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man

Selene the moon Titan. Roman form: Luna

Senate a council of ten representatives elected from the legion at Camp Jupiter

Senate House the building at Camp Jupiter where the senators meet to discuss such issues as whether a quest should be granted or whether war should be declared

Sibyl a prophetess

Sibylline Books the Cumaean Sibyl's prophecies—prescriptions for warding off disasters—dating back to ancient Roman times, collected in nine volumes, six of which were destroyed by the Sibyl herself. The three remaining books were sold to the last Roman king, Tarquin, and then lost over time. Ella the harpy read a copy of the three Books and is trying to reconstruct all the prophecies with her photographic memory and the help of Tyson the Cyclops.

sica (**siccae**, pl.) a short, curved sword

Somme a battle of World War I fought by the British and French against the Germans by the River Somme in France

Somnus the Roman god of sleep

spatha a Roman cavalry sword

spolia opima one-on-one combat between two opposing leaders in a war, the ultimate display of courage for a Roman; literally, *spoils of war*

strix (**strixes**, pl.) a large blood-drinking owl-like bird of ill omen

Stymphalian birds monstrous man-eating birds with sharp Celestial bronze beaks that can tear through flesh. They can also shoot their feathers at prey like arrows.

Styx a powerful water nymph; the eldest daughter of the sea Titan, Oceanus; goddess of the Underworld's most important river; goddess of hatred; the River Styx is named after her

sub rosa Latin for *under the rose*, meaning sworn to secrecy

Subura a crowded lower-class area of ancient Rome

Summer of Love a gathering of more than 100,000 hippies or "flower children" in the San Francisco neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury during the summer of 1967 to enjoy art, music, and spiritual practices while also protesting the government and materialistic values

Tarquin Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was the seventh and final king of Rome, reigning from 534 to 509 BCE, when, after a popular uprising, the Roman Republic was established

Temple Hill the site just outside the city limits of New Rome where the temples to all the gods are located

Terminus the Roman god of boundaries

Terpsichore the Greek goddess of dance; one of the Nine Muses

terza rima a form of verse consisting of three-line stanzas in which the first and third lines rhyme and the middle line rhymes with the first and third lines of following stanza

testudo a tortoise battle formation in which legionnaires put their shields together to form a barrier

Teumessian Fox a gigantic fox sent by the Olympians to prey upon the children of Thebes; it is destined never to be caught

Three Graces the three charities: Beauty, Mirth, and Elegance; daughters of Zeus

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy; Rome was founded on its banks; in ancient Rome, criminals were thrown into the river

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Ouranos, who ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

trireme a Greek warship, having three tiers of oars on each side

triumvirate a political alliance formed by three parties

Trojan War According to legend, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta

Troy a pre-Roman city situated in modern-day Turkey; site of the Trojan War

Underworld the kingdom of the dead, where souls go for eternity; ruled by Hades

vappae Latin for *spoiled wines*

ventus (***venti***, pl.) storm spirits

Venus the Roman goddess of love and beauty. Greek form: Aphrodite

Via Praetoria the main road into Camp Jupiter that runs from the barracks to the headquarters

Vnicornes Imperant Latin for *Unicorns Rule*

vrykolakas (***vrykolakai***, pl.) Greek word for *zombie*

Vulcan the Roman god of fire, including volcanic, and of crafts and blacksmithing. Greek form: Hephaestus

Waystation a place of refuge for demigods, peaceful monsters, and Hunters of Artemis located above Union Station in Indianapolis, Indiana

Zeus the Greek god of the sky and the king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

COMING IN FALL 2020

5

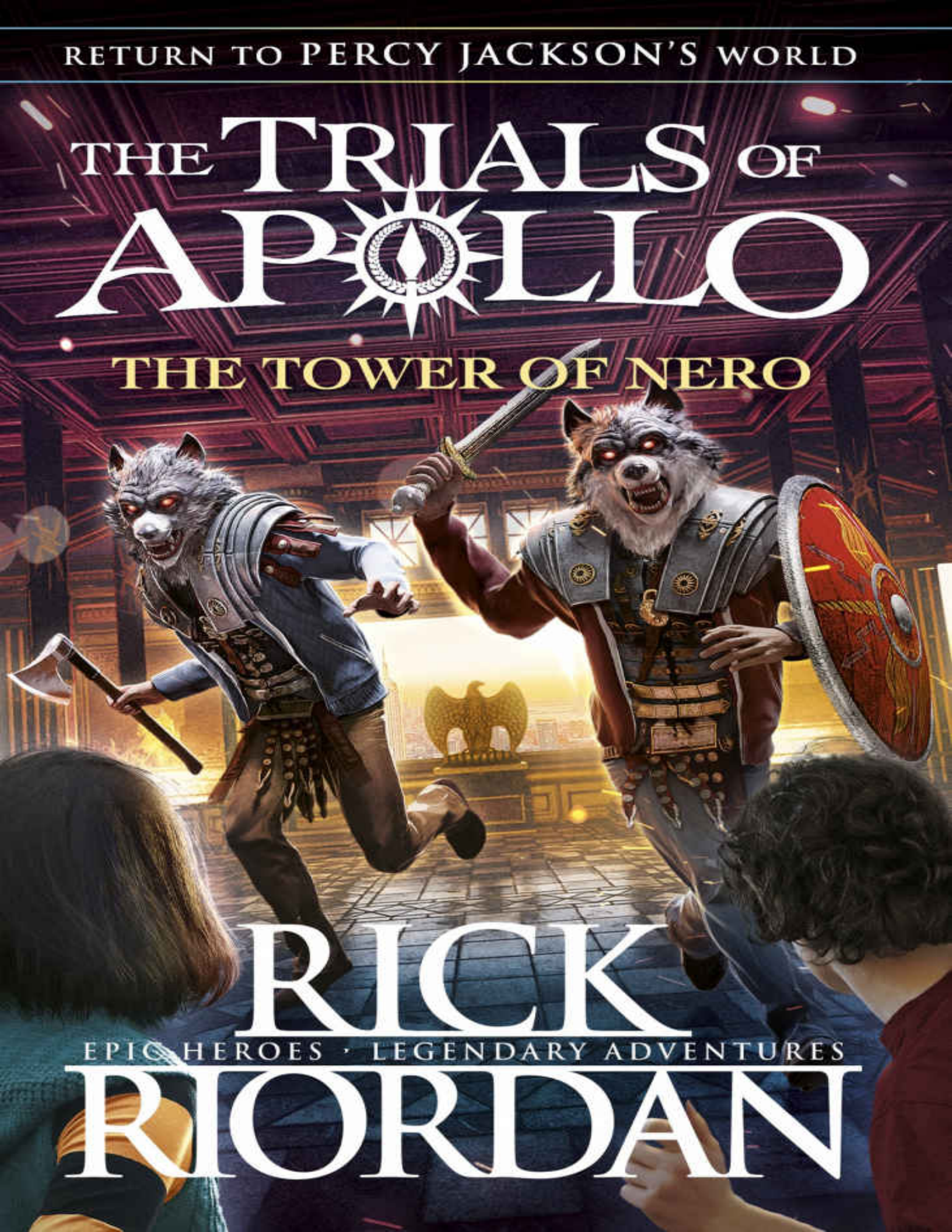
THE TOWER OF NERO

RICK RIORDAN, dubbed “storyteller of the gods” by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series. He is best known for his Percy Jackson and the Olympians books, which bring Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. He expanded on that series with two more: the Heroes of Olympus and the Trials of Apollo, which cleverly combine Greek and Roman gods and heroes with his beloved modern characters. Rick tackled the ancient Egyptian gods in the magic-filled Kane Chronicles trilogy, and Norse mythology in Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures as well as his two #1 best-selling myth collections, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods* and *Percy Jackson’s Greek Heroes*. Rick is also the publisher of an imprint at Disney Hyperion, Rick Riordan Presents, dedicated to finding other authors of highly entertaining fiction based on world cultures and mythologies. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. For more information, go to RickRiordan.com, or follow him on Twitter @camphalfblood.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

THE TOWER OF NERO



RICK RIORDAN

EPIC HEROES · LEGENDARY ADVENTURES

THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

THE TOWER OF NERO

RICK RIORDAN

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GUIDE TO APOLLO-SPEAK

About the Author

Rick Riordan, dubbed ‘storyteller of the gods’ by *Publishers Weekly* , is the author of five *New York Times* number-one bestselling book series with millions of copies sold throughout the world: Percy Jackson, the Heroes of Olympus and the Trials of Apollo, based on Greek and Roman mythology; the Kane Chronicles, based on Egyptian mythology; and Magnus Chase, based on Norse mythology. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* , Rick’s first novel featuring the heroic young demigod, won the Red House Children’s Book Award and is now a blockbuster film franchise starring Logan Lerman.

To learn more about Rick and his books, you can visit him at www.rickriordan.co.uk or follow him on Twitter @camphalfblood.

Books by Rick Riordan

The Percy Jackson series

PERCY JACKSON AND THE LIGHTNING THIEF*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE SEA OF MONSTERS*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE TITAN'S CURSE*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH*
PERCY JACKSON AND THE LAST OLYMPIAN*

THE DEMIGOD FILES
CAMP HALF-BLOOD CONFIDENTIAL
CAMP JUPITER CLASSIFIED

PERCY JACKSON AND THE GREEK GODS
PERCY JACKSON AND THE GREEK HEROES

The Heroes of Olympus series

THE LOST HERO*
THE SON OF NEPTUNE*
THE MARK OF ATHENA
THE HOUSE OF HADES
THE BLOOD OF OLYMPUS

THE DEMIGOD DIARIES

The Kane Chronicles series

THE RED PYRAMID*
THE THRONE OF FIRE*
THE SERPENT'S SHADOW*

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BROOKLYN HOUSE MAGICIAN'S MANUAL

The Percy Jackson and Kane Chronicles Adventures

DEMIGODS AND MAGICIANS: THREE STORIES FROM THE WORLD OF PERCY JACKSON AND THE KANE CHRONICLES

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MAGNUS CHASE AND THE HAMMER OF THOR
MAGNUS CHASE AND THE SHIP OF THE DEAD

HOTEL VALHALLA GUIDE TO THE NORSE WORLDS

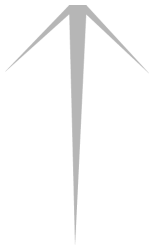
9 FROM THE NINE WORLDS

The Trials of Apollo series

THE HIDDEN ORACLE
THE DARK PROPHECY
THE BURNING MAZE
THE TYRANT'S TOMB
THE TOWER OF NERO

** Also available as a graphic novel*

To Becky,
Every journey leads me home to you



1

Two-headed snake dude
Jamming up my quiet ride.
Also, Meg's shoes stink.

WHEN TRAVELLING THROUGH WASHINGTON, DC, one expects to see a few snakes in human clothing. Still, I was concerned when a two-headed boa constrictor boarded our train at Union Station.

The creature had threaded himself through a blue silk business suit, looping his body into the sleeves and trouser legs to approximate human limbs. Two heads protruded from the collar of his shirt like twin periscopes. He moved with remarkable grace for what was basically an oversize balloon animal, taking a seat at the opposite end of the coach, facing our direction.

The other passengers ignored him. No doubt the Mist warped their perceptions, making them see just another commuter. The snake made no threatening moves. He didn't even glance at us. For all I knew, he was simply a working-stiff monster on his way home.

And yet I could not assume …

I whispered to Meg, 'I don't want to alarm you –'

'Shh,' she said.

Meg took the quiet-car rules seriously. Since we'd boarded, most of the noise in the coach had consisted of Meg shushing me every time I spoke, sneezed or cleared my throat.

'But there's a monster,' I persisted.

She looked up from her complimentary Amtrak magazine, raising an eyebrow above her rhinestone-studded cat-eye glasses. *Where?*

I chin-pointed towards the creature. As our train pulled away from the station, his left head stared absently out of the window. His right head flicked its forked tongue into a bottle of water held in the loop that passed for his hand.

'It's an *amphisbaena* ,' I whispered, then added helpfully, 'a snake with a head at each end.'

Meg frowned, then shrugged, which I took to mean *Looks peaceful enough.* Then she went back to reading.

I suppressed the urge to argue. Mostly because I didn't want to be shushed again.

I couldn't blame Meg for wanting a quiet ride. In the past week, we had battled our way through a pack of wild centaurs in Kansas, faced an angry famine spirit at the World's Largest Fork in Springfield, Missouri (I did not get a selfie), and outrun a pair of blue Kentucky drakons that had chased us several times around Churchill Downs. After all that, a two-headed snake in a suit was perhaps not cause for alarm. Certainly, he wasn't bothering us at the moment.

I tried to relax.

Meg buried her face in her magazine, enraptured by an article on urban gardening. My young companion had grown taller in the months that I'd known her, but she was still compact enough to prop her red high-tops comfortably on the seatback in front of her. Comfortable for *her* , I mean, not for me or the other passengers. Meg hadn't changed her shoes since our run around the racetrack, and they looked and smelled like the back end of a horse.

At least she had traded her tattered green dress for Dollar General jeans and a green VNICORNES IMPERANT! T-shirt she'd bought at the Camp Jupiter gift shop. With her pageboy haircut beginning to grow out and an angry red zit erupting on her chin, she no longer looked like a kindergartener. She looked almost her age: a sixth-grader entering the circle of hell known as puberty.

I had not shared this observation with Meg. For one thing, I had my own acne to worry about. For another thing, as my master, Meg could literally order me to jump out of the window and I would be forced to obey.

The train rolled through the suburbs of Washington. The late-afternoon sun flickered between the buildings like the lamp of an old movie projector. It was a wonderful time of day, when a sun god should be wrapping up his work, heading to the old stables to park his chariot, then kicking back at his palace with a goblet of nectar, a few dozen adoring nymphs and a new season of *The Real Goddesses of Olympus* to binge-watch.

Not for me, though. I got a creaking seat on an Amtrak train and hours to binge-watch Meg's stinky shoes.

At the opposite end of the car, the amphisbaena still made no threatening moves … unless one considered drinking water from a non-reusable bottle an act of aggression.

Why, then, were my neck hairs tingling?

I couldn't regulate my breathing. I felt trapped in my window seat.

Perhaps I was just nervous about what awaited us in New York. After six months in this miserable mortal body, I was approaching my endgame.

Meg and I had blundered our way across the United States and back again. We'd freed ancient Oracles, defeated legions of monsters and suffered the untold horrors of the American public transportation system. Finally, after many tragedies, we had triumphed over two of

the Triumvirate's evil emperors, Commodus and Caligula, at Camp Jupiter.

But the worst was yet to come.

We were heading back to where our troubles began – Manhattan, the base of Nero Claudius Caesar, Meg's abusive stepfather and my least favourite fiddle player. Even if we somehow managed to defeat him, a still more powerful threat lurked in the background: my archnemesis, Python, who had taken up residence at my sacred Oracle of Delphi as if it were some cut-price Airbnb.

In the next few days, either I would defeat these enemies and become the god Apollo again (assuming my father Zeus allowed it) or I would die trying. One way or the other, my time as Lester Papadopoulos was coming to an end.

Perhaps it wasn't a mystery why I felt so agitated …

I tried to focus on the beautiful sunset. I tried not to obsess about my impossible to-do list or the two-headed snake in row sixteen.

I made it all the way to Philadelphia without having a nervous breakdown. But, as we pulled out of Thirtieth Street Station, two things became clear to me: 1) the amphisbaena wasn't leaving the train, which meant he probably wasn't a daily commuter, and 2) my danger radar was pinging more strongly than ever.

I felt *stalked.* I had the same ants-in-the-pores feeling I used to get when playing hide-and-seek with Artemis and her Hunters in the woods, just before they jumped from the bushes and riddled me with arrows. That was back when my sister and I were younger deities and could still enjoy such simple amusements.

I risked a look at the amphisbaena and nearly jumped out of my jeans. The creature was staring at me now, his four yellow eyes unblinking and … were they beginning to glow? Oh, no, no, no. Glowing eyes are never good.

'I need to get out,' I told Meg.

'Shh.'

‘But that creature. I want to check on it. His eyes are glowing!’

Meg squinted at Mr Snake. ‘No, they’re not. They’re *gleaming.* Besides, he’s just sitting there.’

‘He’s sitting there suspiciously!’

The passenger behind us whispered, ‘Shh!’

Meg raised her eyebrows at me. *Told you so.*

I pointed at the aisle and pouted at Meg.

She rolled her eyes, untangled herself from the hammock-like position she’d taken up and let me out. ‘Don’t start a fight,’ she ordered.

Great. Now I would have to wait for the monster to attack before I could defend myself.

I stood in the aisle, waiting for the blood to return to my numb legs. Whoever invented the human circulatory system had done a lousy job.

The amphisbaena hadn’t moved. His eyes were still fixed on me. He appeared to be in some sort of trance. Maybe he was building up his energy for a massive attack. Did amphisbaenae do that?

I scoured my memory for facts about the creature but came up with very little. The Roman writer Pliny claimed that wearing a live baby amphisbaena around your neck could assure you a safe pregnancy. (Not helpful.) Wearing its skin could make you attractive to potential partners. (Hmm. No, also not helpful.) Its heads could spit poison. Aha! That must be it. The monster was powering up for a dual-mouthed poison vomit hose-down of the train car!

What to do …?

Despite my occasional bursts of godly power and skill, I couldn’t count on one when I needed it. Most of the time, I was still a pitiful seventeen-year-old boy.

I could retrieve my bow and quiver from the overhead luggage compartment. Being armed would be nice. Then again, that would telegraph my hostile intentions. Meg

would probably scold me for overreacting. (I’m sorry, Meg, but those eyes were *glowing* , not gleaming.)

If only I’d kept a smaller weapon, perhaps a dagger, concealed in my shirt. Why wasn’t I the god of daggers?

I decided to stroll down the aisle as if I were simply on my way to the restroom. If the amphisbaena attacked, I would scream. Hopefully Meg would put down her magazine long enough to come rescue me. At least I would have forced the inevitable confrontation. If the snake didn’t make a move, well, perhaps he really was harmless. Then I *would* go to the restroom, because I actually needed to.

I stumbled on my tingly legs, which didn’t help my ‘look casual’ approach. I considered whistling a carefree tune, then remembered the whole quiet-car thing.

Four rows from the monster. My heart hammered. Those eyes were definitely glowing, definitely fixed on me. The monster sat unnaturally motionless, even for a reptile.

Two rows away. My trembling jaw and sweaty face made it hard to appear nonchalant. The amphisbaena’s suit looked expensive and well-tailored. Probably, being a giant snake, he couldn’t wear clothes right off the rack. His glistening brown-and-yellow diamond-pattern skin did not seem like the sort of thing one might wear to look more attractive on a dating app, unless one dated boa constrictors.

When the amphisbaena made his move, I thought I was prepared.

I was wrong. The creature lunged with incredible speed, lassoing my wrist with the loop of his false left arm. I was too surprised even to yelp. If he’d meant to kill me, I would have died.

Instead, he simply tightened his grip, stopping me in my tracks, clinging to me as if he were drowning.

He spoke in a low double hiss that resonated in my bone marrow:

‘The son of Hades, cavern-runners’ friend,
Must show the secret way unto the throne.
On Nero’s own your lives do now depend.’

As abruptly as he’d grabbed me, he let me go. Muscles undulated along the length of his body as if he were coming to a slow boil. He sat up straight, elongating his necks until he was almost noses-to-nose with me. The glow faded from his eyes.

‘What am I do–?’ His left head looked at his right head. ‘How …?’

His right head seemed equally mystified. It looked at me. ‘Who are –? Wait, did I miss the Baltimore stop? My wife is going to kill me!’

I was too shocked to speak.

Those lines he’d spoken … I recognized the poetic metre. This amphisbaena had delivered a prophetic message. It dawned on me that this monster might in fact be a regular commuter who’d been possessed, hijacked by the whims of Fate because … Of course. He was a snake. Since ancient times, snakes have channelled the wisdom of the earth, because they live underground. A giant serpent would be especially susceptible to oracular voices.

I wasn’t sure what to do. Should I apologize to him for his inconvenience? Should I give him a tip? And, if he wasn’t the threat that had set off my danger radar, what was?

I was saved from an awkward conversation, and the amphisbaena was saved from his wife killing him, when two crossbow bolts flew across the coach and killed him instead, pinning the poor snake’s necks against the back wall.

I shrieked. Several nearby passengers shushed me.

The amphisbaena disintegrated into yellow dust, leaving nothing behind but a well-tailored suit.

I raised my hands slowly and turned as if pivoting on a land mine. I half expected another crossbow bolt to pierce

my chest. There was no way I could dodge an attack from someone with such accuracy. The best I could do was appear non-threatening. I was good at that.

At the opposite end of the coach stood two hulking figures. One was a Germanus, judging from his beard and scraggly beaded hair, his hide armour, and his Imperial gold greaves and breastplate. I did not recognize him, but I'd met too many of his kind recently. I had no doubt who he worked for. Nero's people had found us.

Meg was still seated, holding her magical twin golden *sica* blades, but the Germanus had the edge of his broadsword against her neck, encouraging her to stay put.

His companion was the crossbow-shooter. She was even taller and heavier, wearing an Amtrak conductor's uniform that fooled no one – except, apparently, all the mortals on the train, who didn't give the newcomers a second look. Under her conductor's hat, the shooter's scalp was shaved on the sides, leaving a lustrous brown mane down the middle that curled over her shoulder in a braided rope. Her short-sleeved shirt stretched so tight against her muscular shoulders I thought her epaulettes and name tag would pop off. Her arms were covered with interlocking circular tattoos, and around her neck was a thick golden ring – a torque.

I hadn't seen one of those in ages. This woman was a Gaul! The realization made my stomach frost over. In the old days of the Roman Republic, Gauls were feared even more than the Germani.

She had already reloaded her double crossbow and was pointing it at my head. Hanging from her belt was a variety of other weapons: a gladius, a club and a dagger. Oh, sure, *she* got a dagger.

Keeping her eyes on me, she jerked her chin towards her shoulder, the universal sign for *C'mere or I'll shoot you.*

I calculated my odds of charging down the aisle and tackling our enemies before they killed Meg and me. Zero.

My odds of cowering in fear behind a chair while Meg took care of both of them? Slightly better, but still not great.

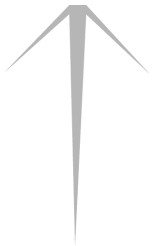
I made my way down the aisle, my knees wobbling. The mortal passengers frowned as I passed. As near as I could figure, they thought my shriek had been a disturbance unworthy of the quiet car, and the conductor was now calling me out. The fact that the conductor wielded a crossbow and had just killed a two-headed serpentine commuter did not seem to register with them.

I reached my row and glanced at Meg, partly to make sure she was all right, partly because I was curious why she hadn't attacked. Just holding a sword to Meg's throat was normally not enough to discourage her.

She was staring in shock at the Gaul. 'Luguselwa?'

The woman nodded curtly, which told me two horrifying things: first, Meg knew her. Second, Luguselwa was her name. As she regarded Meg, the fierceness in the Gaul's eyes dialled back a few notches, from *I am going to kill everyone now* to *I am going to kill everyone soon.*

'Yes, Sapling,' said the Gaul. 'Now put away your weapons before Gunther is obliged to chop off your head.'



2

Pastries for dinner?
Your fave Lester could never.
Got to pee. Later.

THE SWORD-WIELDER LOOKED DELIGHTED. ‘Chop off head?’

His name, GUNTHER, was printed on an Amtrak name tag he wore over his armour – his only concession to being in disguise.

‘Not yet.’ Luguselwa kept her eyes on us. ‘As you can see, Gunther loves decapitating people, so let’s play nice. Come along –’

‘Lu,’ Meg said. ‘Why?’

When it came to expressing hurt, Meg’s voice was a fine-tuned instrument. I’d heard her mourn the deaths of our friends. I’d heard her describe her father’s murder. I’d heard her rage against her foster father, Nero, who had killed her dad and twisted her mind with years of emotional abuse.

But when addressing Luguselwa, Meg’s voice played in an entirely different key. She sounded as if her best friend had just dismembered her favourite doll for no reason and without warning. She sounded hurt, confused, incredulous

– as if, in a life full of indignities, this was one indignity she never could have anticipated.

Lu's jaw muscles tightened. Veins bulged on her temples. I couldn't tell if she was angry, feeling guilty or showing us her warm-and-fuzzy side.

'Do you remember what I taught you about duty, Sapling?'

Meg gulped back a sob.

'Do you?' Lu said, her voice sharper.

'Yes,' Meg whispered.

'Then get your things and come along.' Lu pushed Gunther's sword away from Meg's neck.

The big man grumbled 'Hmph', which I assumed was Germanic for *I never get to have any fun.*

Looking bewildered, Meg rose and opened the overhead compartment. I couldn't understand why she was going along so passively with Luguselwa's orders. We'd fought against worse odds. Who *was* this Gaul?

'That's it?' I whispered as Meg passed me my backpack. 'We're giving up?'

'Lester,' Meg muttered, 'just do what I say.'

I shouldered my pack, my bow and quiver. Meg fastened her gardening belt around her waist. Lu and Gunther did not look concerned that I was now armed with arrows and Meg with an ample supply of heirloom-vegetable seeds. As we got our gear in order, the mortal passengers gave us annoyed looks, but no one shushed us, probably because they did not want to anger the two large conductors escorting us out.

'This way.' Lu pointed with her crossbow to the exit behind her. 'The others are waiting.'

The others?

I did not want to meet any more Gauls or Gunthers, but Meg followed Lu meekly through the Plexiglas double doors. I went next, Gunther breathing down my neck

behind me, probably contemplating how easy it would be to separate my head from my body.

A gangway connected our car to the next: a loud, lurching hallway with automatic double doors on either end, a closet-size restroom in one corner and exterior doors to port and starboard. I considered throwing myself out of one of these exits and hoping for the best, but I feared 'the best' would mean dying on impact with the ground. It was pitch-black outside. Judging from the rumble of the corrugated steel panels beneath my feet, I guessed the train was going well over a hundred miles an hour.

Through the far set of Plexiglas doors, I spied the café car: a grim concession counter, a row of booths and a half-dozen large men milling around – more Germani. Nothing good was going to happen in there. If Meg and I were going to make a break for it, this was our chance.

Before I could make any sort of desperate move, Luguselwa stopped abruptly just before the café-car doors. She turned to face us.

'Gunther,' she snapped, 'check the bathroom for infiltrators.'

This seemed to confuse Gunther as much as it did me, either because he didn't see the point, or he had no idea what an infiltrator was.

I wondered why Luguselwa was acting so paranoid. Did she worry we had a legion of demigods stashed in the restroom, waiting to spring out and rescue us? Or perhaps like me she'd once surprised a Cyclops on the porcelain throne and no longer trusted public toilets.

After a brief stare-down, Gunther muttered 'Hmph' and did as he was told.

As soon as he poked his head in the loo, Lu (the other Lu, not *loo*) fixed us with an intent stare. 'When we go through the tunnel to New York,' she said, 'you will both ask to use the toilet.'

I'd taken a lot of silly commands before, mostly from Meg, but this was a new low.

'Actually, I need to go now,' I said.

'Hold it,' she said.

I glanced at Meg to see if this made any sense to her, but she was staring morosely at the floor.

Gunther emerged from potty patrol. 'Nobody.'

Poor guy. If you had to check a train's toilet for infiltrators, the *least* you could hope for was a few infiltrators to kill.

'Right, then,' said Lu. 'Come on.'

She herded us into the café car. Six Germani turned and stared at us, their meaty fists full of Danishes and cups of coffee. Barbarians! Who else would eat breakfast pastries at night? The warriors were dressed like Gunther in hides and gold armour, cleverly disguised behind Amtrak name tags. One of the men, AEDELBEORT (the number-one most popular Germanic baby boy's name in 162 BCE), barked a question at Lu in a language I didn't recognize. Lu responded in the same tongue. Her answer seemed to satisfy the warriors, who went back to their coffee and Danishes. Gunther joined them, grumbling about how hard it was to find good enemies to decapitate.

'Sit there,' Lu told us, pointing to a window booth.

Meg slid in glumly. I settled in across from her, propping my longbow, quiver and backpack next to me. Lu stood within earshot, just in case we tried to discuss an escape plan. She needn't have worried. Meg still wouldn't meet my eyes.

I wondered again who Luguselwa was, and what she meant to Meg. Not once in our months of travel had Meg mentioned her. This fact disturbed me. Rather than indicating that Lu was unimportant, it made me suspect she was very important indeed.

And why a Gaul? Gauls had been unusual in Nero's Rome. By the time he became emperor, most of them had been

conquered and forcibly ‘civilized’. Those who still wore tattoos and torques and lived according to the old ways had been pushed to the fringes of Brittany or forced over to the British Isles. The name Luguselwa … My Gaulish had never been very good, but I thought it meant *beloved of the god Lugus* . I shuddered. Those Celtic deities were a strange, fierce bunch.

My thoughts were too unhinged to solve the puzzle of Lu. I kept thinking back to the poor amphisbaena she’d killed – a harmless monster commuter who would never make it home to his wife, all because a prophecy had made him its pawn.

His message had left me shaken – a verse in terza rima, like the one we’d received at Camp Jupiter:

> *O son of Zeus the final challenge face.*
> *The tow’r of Nero two alone ascend.*
> *Dislodge the beast that hast usurped thy place.*

Yes, I had memorized the cursed thing.

Now we had our second set of instructions, clearly linked to the previous set, because the first and third lines rhymed with *ascend.* Stupid Dante and his stupid idea for a never-ending poem structure:

> *The son of Hades, cavern-runners’ friend,*
> *Must show the secret way unto the throne.*
> *On Nero’s own your lives do now depend.*

I knew a son of Hades: Nico di Angelo. He was probably still at Camp Half-Blood on Long Island. If he had some secret way to Nero’s throne, he’d never get the chance to show us unless we escaped this train. How Nico might be a ‘cavern-runners’ friend’, I had no idea.

The last line of the new verse was just cruel. We were presently surrounded by ‘Nero’s own’, so of course our

lives depended on them. I wanted to believe there was more to that line, something positive … maybe tied to the fact that Lu had ordered us to go to the bathroom when we entered the tunnel to New York. But, given Lu's hostile expression, and the presence of her seven heavily caffeinated and sugar-fuelled Germanus friends, I didn't feel optimistic.

I squirmed in my seat. Oh, *why* had I thought about the bathroom? I *really* needed to go now.

Outside, the illuminated billboards of New Jersey zipped by: ads for auto dealerships where you could buy an impractical race car; injury lawyers you could employ to blame the other drivers once you crashed that race car; casinos where you could gamble away the money you won from the injury lawsuits. The great circle of life.

The station-stop for Newark Airport came and went. Gods help me, I was so desperate I considered making a break for it. In *Newark* .

Meg stayed put, so I did, too.

The tunnel to New York would be coming up soon. Perhaps, instead of asking to use the restroom, we could spring into action against our captors …

Lu seemed to read my thoughts. 'It's a good thing you surrendered. Nero has three other teams like mine on this train alone. *Every* passage – every train, bus and flight into Manhattan – has been covered. Nero's got the Oracle of Delphi on his side, remember. He knew you were coming tonight. You were never going to get into the city without being caught.'

Way to crush my hopes, Luguselwa. Telling me that Nero had his ally Python peering into the future for him, using *my* sacred Oracle against me … Harsh.

Meg, however, suddenly perked up, as if something Lu said gave her hope. 'So how is it *you're* the one who found us, Lu? Just luck?'

Lu's tattoos rippled as she flexed her arms, the swirling Celtic circles making me seasick.

'I *know* you, Sapling,' she said. 'I know how to track you. There is no luck.'

I could think of several gods of luck who would disagree with that statement, but I didn't argue. Being a captive had dampened my desire for small talk.

Lu turned to her companions. 'As soon as we get to Penn Station, we deliver our captives to the escort team. I want no mistakes. No one kills the girl or the god unless it's absolutely necessary.'

'Is it necessary now?' Gunther asked.

'No,' Lu said. 'The *princeps* has plans for them. He wants them alive.'

The princeps. My mouth tasted bitterer than the bitterest Amtrak coffee. Being marched through Nero's front door was *not* how I'd planned to confront him.

One moment we were rumbling across a wasteland of New Jersey warehouses and dockyards. The next, we plunged into darkness, entering the tunnel that would take us under the Hudson River. On the intercom, a garbled announcement informed us that our next stop would be Penn Station.

'I need to pee,' Meg announced.

I stared at her, dumbfounded. Was she *really* going to follow Lu's strange instructions? The Gaul had captured us and killed an innocent two-headed snake. Why would Meg trust her?

Meg pressed her heel hard on the top of my foot.

'Yes,' I squeaked. 'I also need to pee.' For me, at least, this was painfully true.

'Hold it,' Gunther grumbled.

'I *really* need to pee.' Meg bounced up and down.

Lu heaved a sigh. Her exasperation did not sound faked. 'Fine.' She turned to her squad. 'I'll take them. The rest of you stay here and prepare to disembark.'

None of the Germani objected. They'd probably heard enough of Gunther's complaints about potty patrol. They began shoving last-minute Danishes into their mouths and gathering up their equipment as Meg and I extracted ourselves from our booth.

'Your gear,' Lu reminded me.

I blinked. Right. Who went to the bathroom without their bow and quiver? That would be stupid. I grabbed my things.

Lu herded us back into the gangway. As soon as the double doors closed behind her, she murmured, '*Now* .'

Meg bolted for the quiet car.

'Hey!' Lu shoved me out of the way, pausing long enough to mutter, 'Block the door. Decouple the coaches,' then raced after Meg.

Do what *now?*

Two scimitars flashed into existence in Lu's hands. Wait – she had Meg's swords? No. Just before the end of the gangway, Meg turned to face her, summoning her own blades, and the two women fought like demons. They were *both dimachaeri* , the rarest form of gladiator? That must mean – I didn't have time to think about what that meant.

Behind me, the Germani were shouting and scrambling. They would be through the doors any second.

I didn't understand exactly what was happening, but it occurred to my stupid slow mortal brain that perhaps, just perhaps, Lu was trying to help us. If I didn't block the doors like she'd asked, we would be overrun by seven angry sticky-fingered barbarians.

I slammed my foot against the base of the double doors. There were no handles. I had to press my palms against the panels and push them together to keep them shut.

Gunther tackled the doors at full speed, the impact nearly dislocating my jaw. The other Germani piled in behind him. My only advantages were the narrow space they were in, which made it difficult for them to combine their strength,

and the Germani's own lack of sense. Instead of working together to prise the doors apart, they simply pushed and shoved against one another, using Gunther's face as a battering ram.

Behind me, Lu and Meg jabbed and slashed, their blades furiously clanging against one another.

'Good, Sapling,' Lu said under her breath. 'You remember your training.' Then louder, for the sake of our audience: 'I'll kill you, foolish girl!'

I imagined how this must look to the Germani on the other side of the Plexiglas: their comrade Lu, trapped in combat with an escaped prisoner, while I attempted to hold them back. My hands were going numb. My arm and chest muscles ached. I glanced around desperately for an emergency door lock, but there was only an emergency OPEN button. What good was that?

The train roared on through the tunnel. I estimated we had only minutes before we pulled into Penn Station, where Nero's 'escort team' would be waiting. I did not wish to be escorted.

Decouple the coaches, Lu had told me.

How was I supposed to do that, especially while holding the gangway doors shut? I was no train engineer! Choo-choos were more Hephaestus's thing.

I looked over my shoulder, scanning the gangway. Shockingly, there was no clearly labelled switch that would allow a passenger to decouple the train. What was wrong with Amtrak?

There! On the floor, a series of hinged metal flaps overlapped, creating a safe surface for passengers to walk across when the train twisted and turned. One of those flaps had been kicked open, perhaps by Lu, exposing the coupling underneath.

Even if I could reach it from where I stood, which I couldn't, I doubted I would have the strength and dexterity to stick my arm down there, cut the cables and prise open

the clamp. The gap between the floor panels was too narrow, the coupling too far down. Just to hit it from here, I would have to be the world's greatest archer!

Oh. Wait …

Against my chest, the doors were bowing under the weight of seven barbarians. An axe blade jutted through the rubber lining next to my ear. Turning around so I could shoot my bow would be madness.

Yes, I thought hysterically. *Let's do that.*

I bought myself a moment by pulling out an arrow and jabbing it through the gap between the doors. Gunther howled. The pressure eased as the clump of Germani readjusted. I flipped around so my back was to the Plexiglas, one heel wedged against the base of the doors. I fumbled with my bow and managed to nock an arrow.

My new bow was a god-level weapon from the vaults of Camp Jupiter. My archery skills had improved dramatically over the last six months. Still, this was a terrible idea. It was impossible to shoot properly with one's back against a hard surface. I simply couldn't draw the bowstring far enough.

Nevertheless, I fired. The arrow disappeared into the gap in the floor, completely missing the coupling.

'Penn Station in just a minute,' said a voice on the PA system. 'Doors will open on the left.'

'Running out of time!' Lu shouted. She slashed at Meg's head. Meg jabbed low, nearly impaling the Gaul's thigh.

I shot another arrow. This time the point sparked against the clasp, but the train cars remained stubbornly connected.

The Germani pounded against the doors. A Plexiglas panel popped out of its frame. A fist reached through and grabbed my shirt.

With a desperate shriek, I lurched away from the doors and shot one last time at a full draw. The arrow sliced

through the cables and slammed into the clasp. With a shudder and a groan, the coupling broke.

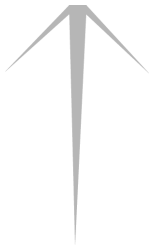
Germani poured into the gangway as I leaped across the widening gap between the coaches. I almost skewered myself on Meg's and Lu's scimitars, but I somehow managed to regain my footing.

I turned as the rest of the train shot into the darkness at seventy miles an hour, seven Germani staring at us in disbelief and yelling insults I will not repeat.

For another fifty feet, our decoupled section of the train rolled forward of its own momentum, then slowed to a stop. Meg and Lu lowered their weapons. A brave passenger from the quiet car dared to stick her head out and ask what was going on.

I shushed her.

Lu glared at me. 'Took you long enough, Lester. Now let's move before my men come back. You two just went from *capture alive* to *proof of death is acceptable* .'



3

Arrow of wisdom,
Hook me up with a hideout.
No, not that one. NO!

‘I’M CONFUSED,’ I SAID AS WE STUMBLED along in the dark tunnels. ‘Are we still prisoners?’

Lu glanced at me, then at Meg. ‘Dense for a god, isn’t he?’

‘You have no idea,’ Meg grumbled.

‘Do you work for Nero or not?’ I demanded. ‘And how exactly …?’

I wagged my finger from Lu to Meg, silently asking, *How do you know each other?* Or perhaps, *Are you related since you’re equally annoying?*

Then I caught the glint of their matching gold rings, one on each of their middle fingers. I remembered the way Lu and Meg had fought, their four blades slicing and stabbing in perfect synchronization. The obvious truth smacked me in the face.

‘You trained Meg,’ I realized. ‘To be a dimachaerus.’

‘And she’s kept her skills sharp.’ Lu elbowed Meg affectionately. ‘I’m pleased, Sapling.’

I had never seen Meg look so proud about *anything.*

She tackled her old trainer in a hug. ‘I knew you weren’t bad.’

‘Hmm.’ Lu didn’t seem to know what to do with the hug. She patted Meg on the shoulder. ‘I’m plenty bad, Sapling. But I’m not going to let Nero torture you any more. Let’s keep moving.’

Torture. Yes, that was the word.

I wondered how Meg could trust this woman. She’d killed the amphisbaena without batting an eye. I had no doubt she would do the same to me if she felt it necessary.

Worse: Nero paid her salary. Whether Lu had saved us from capture or not, she’d trained Meg, which meant she must have stood by for years while Nero tormented my young friend emotionally and mentally. Lu had been part of the problem – part of Meg’s indoctrination into the emperor’s twisted family. I worried that Meg was slipping into her old patterns. Perhaps Nero had figured out a way to manipulate her indirectly through this former teacher she admired.

On the other hand, I wasn’t sure how to broach that subject. We were trekking through a maze of subway-maintenance tunnels with only Lu as our guide. She had a lot more weapons than I did. Also, Meg was my master. She’d told me we were going to follow Lu, so that’s what we did.

We continued our march, Meg and Lu trudging side by side, me straggling behind. I’d like to tell you I was ‘guarding their six’, or performing some other important task, but I think Meg had just forgotten about me.

Overhead, steel-caged work lights cast prison-bar shadows across the brick walls. Mud and slime coated the floor, exuding a smell like the old casks of ‘wine’ Dionysus insisted on keeping in his cellar, despite the fact that they had long ago turned to vinegar. At least Meg’s sneakers would no longer smell like horse poop. They would now be coated with new and different toxic waste.

After stumbling along for another million miles, I ventured to ask, ‘Miss Lu, where are we going?’ I was startled by the volume of my own voice echoing through the dark.

‘Away from the search grid,’ she said, as if this were obvious. ‘Nero has tapped most of the closed-circuit cameras in Manhattan. We need to get off his radar.’

It was a bit jarring to hear a Gaulish warrior talking about radar and cameras.

I wondered again how Lu had come into Nero’s service.

As much as I hated to admit it, the emperors of the Triumvirate were basically minor gods. They were picky about which followers they allowed to spend eternity with them. The Germani made sense. Dense and cruel as they might be, the imperial bodyguards were fiercely loyal. But why a Gaul? Luguselwa must have been valuable to Nero for reasons beyond her sword skills. I didn’t trust that such a warrior would turn on her master after two millennia.

My suspicions must have radiated from me like heat from an oven. Lu glanced back and noted my frown. ‘Apollo, if I wanted you dead, you would already be dead.’

True , I thought, but Lu could have added, *If I wanted to trick you into following me so I could deliver you alive to Nero, this is exactly what I’d be doing.*

Lu quickened her pace. Meg scowled at me like, *Be nice to my Gaul* , then she hurried to catch up.

I lost track of time. The adrenalin spike from the train fight faded, leaving me weary and sore. Sure, I was still running for my life, but I’d spent most of the last six months running for my life. I couldn’t maintain a productive state of panic indefinitely. Tunnel goo soaked into my socks. My shoes felt like squishy clay pots.

For a while, I was impressed by how well Lu knew the tunnels. She forged ahead, taking us down one turn after another. Then, when she hesitated at a junction a bit too long, I realized the truth.

‘You don’t know where we’re going,’ I said.

She scowled. ‘I told you. Away from the –’

‘Search grid. Cameras. Yes. But where are we *going* ?’

‘Somewhere. Anywhere safe.’

I laughed. I surprised myself by actually feeling *relieved* . If Lu was this clueless about our destination, then I felt safer trusting her. She had no grand plan. We were lost. What a relief!

Lu did not seem to appreciate my sense of humour.

‘Excuse me if I had to improvise,’ she grumbled. ‘You’re fortunate *I* found you on that train rather than one of the emperor’s other search parties. Otherwise you’d be in Nero’s holding cell right now.’

Meg gave me another scowl. ‘Yeah, Lester. Besides, it’s fine.’

She pointed to an old section of Greek-key-design tile along the left-hand corridor, perhaps left over from an abandoned subway line. ‘I recognize that. There should be an exit up ahead.’

I wanted to ask how she could possibly know this. Then I remembered Meg had spent a great deal of her childhood roaming dark alleys, derelict buildings and other strange and unusual places in Manhattan with Nero’s blessing – the evil imperial version of free-range parenting.

I could imagine a younger Meg exploring these tunnels, doing cartwheels in the muck and growing mushrooms in forgotten locations.

We followed her for … I don’t know, six or seven miles? That’s what it felt like, at least. Once, we stopped abruptly when a deep and distant *BOOM* echoed through the corridor.

‘Train?’ I asked nervously, though we’d left the tracks behind long ago.

Lu tilted her head. ‘No. That was thunder.’

I didn’t see how that could be. When we’d entered the tunnel in New Jersey, there’d been no sign of rain. I didn’t

like the idea of sudden thunderstorms so close to the Empire State Building – entrance to Mount Olympus, home of Zeus, aka Big Daddy Lightning Bolt.

Undeterred, Meg forged ahead.

Finally, our tunnel dead-ended at a metal ladder. Overhead was a loose manhole cover, light and water spilling from one edge like a weeping crescent moon.

'I remember this opens to an alleyway,' Meg announced. 'No cameras – at least there weren't any last time I was here.'

Lu grunted as if to say, *Good work* , or maybe just, *This is going to suck.*

The Gaul ascended first. Moments later, the three of us stood in a storm-lashed alley between two apartment buildings. Lightning forked overhead, lacing the dark clouds with gold. Rain needled my face and poked me in the eyes.

Where had this tempest come from? Was it a welcome-home present from my father, or a warning? Or maybe it was just a regular summer storm. Sadly, my time as Lester had taught me that not every meteorological event was about me.

Thunder rattled the windows on either side of us. Judging from the yellow-brick facades of the buildings, I guessed we were on the Upper East Side somewhere, though that seemed an impossibly long underground walk from Penn Station. At the end of the alley, taxis zipped down a busy street: Park Avenue? Lexington?

I hugged my arms. My teeth chattered. My quiver was starting to fill with water, the strap getting heavier across my shoulder. I turned to Lu and Meg. 'I don't suppose either of you has a magic item that stops rain?'

From her belt of infinite weapons, Lu pulled something that I'd assumed was a police baton. She clicked a button on the side and it blossomed into an umbrella. Naturally, it was just big enough for Lu and Meg.

I sighed. ‘I walked right into that, didn’t I?’

‘Yep,’ Meg agreed.

I pulled my backpack over my head, which effectively stopped 0.003 percent of the rain from hitting my face. My clothes were plastered to my skin. My heart slowed and sped up at random, as if it couldn’t decide whether to be exhausted or terrified.

‘What now?’ I asked.

‘We find someplace to regroup,’ said Lu.

I eyed the nearest dumpster. ‘With all the real estate Nero controls in Manhattan, you don’t have *one* secret base we could use?’

Lu’s laugh was the only dry thing in that alley. ‘I told you, Nero monitors all public security cameras in New York. How closely do you think he monitors his own properties? You want to risk it?’

I hated that she had a point.

I wanted to trust Luguselwa, because Meg trusted her. I recognized that Lu had saved us on the train. Also, the amphisbaena’s last line of prophecy tumbled around in my head: *On Nero’s own your lives do now depend* .

That could refer to Lu, which meant she might be trustworthy.

On the other hand, Lu had killed the amphisbaena. For all I knew, if he had lived a few more minutes, he might have spouted another bit of iambic pentameter: *Not Lu. Not Lu. Don’t ever trust the Gaul.*

‘So if you’re on our side,’ I said, ‘why all the pretending on the train? Why kill that amphisbaena? Why the charade about escorting us to the bathroom?’

Lu grunted. ‘First of all, I’m on Meg’s side. Don’t much care about you.’

Meg smirked. ‘That’s a good point.’

‘As for the monster …’ Lu shrugged. ‘It was a monster. It’ll regenerate in Tartarus eventually. No great loss.’

I suspected Mr Snake's wife might disagree with that. Then again, not too long ago, I had regarded demigods in much the same way that Lu regarded the amphisbaena.

'As for the play-acting,' she said, 'if I'd turned on my comrades, I ran the risk of you two getting killed, me getting killed or one of my men escaping and reporting back to Nero. I would have been outed as a traitor.'

'But they *all* got away,' I protested. 'They'll *all* report back to Nero and … Oh. They'll tell Nero –'

'That the last time they saw me,' Lu said, 'I was fighting like crazy, trying to stop you from escaping.'

Meg detached herself from Lu's side, her eyes widening. 'But Nero will think you're dead! You can stay with us!'

Lu gave her a rueful smile. 'No, Sapling. I'll have to go back soon. If we're lucky, Nero will believe I'm still on his side.'

'But *why* ?' Meg demanded. 'You can't go back!'

'It's the only way,' Lu said. 'I had to make sure you didn't get caught coming into the city. Now … I need time to explain to you what's going on … what Nero is planning.'

I didn't like the hesitation in her voice. Whatever Nero was planning, it had shaken Lu badly.

'Besides,' she continued, 'if you're going to stand any chance of beating him, you'll need someone on the inside. It's important that Nero think I tried to stop you, failed, then returned to him with my tail between my legs.'

'But …' My brain was too waterlogged to form any more questions. 'Never mind. You can explain when we get somewhere dry. Speaking of which –'

'I've got an idea,' Meg said.

She jogged to the corner of the alley. Lu and I sloshed along behind her. The signs on the nearest corner informed us that we were at Lexington and Seventy-Fifth.

Meg grinned. 'See?'

'See what?' I said. 'What are you …?'

Her meaning hit me like an Amtrak quiet car. ‘Oh, no,’ I said. ‘No, they’ve done enough for us. I *won’t* put them in any more danger, especially if Nero is after us.’

‘But last time you were totally fine with –’

‘Meg, no!’

Lu looked back and forth between us. ‘What are you talking about?’

I wanted to stick my head in my backpack and scream. Six months ago, I’d had no qualms about hitting up an old friend who lived a few blocks from here. But now … after all the trouble and heartbreak I’d brought to every place that had harboured me … No. I could *not* do that again.

‘How about this?’ I drew the Arrow of Dodona from my quiver. ‘We’ll ask my prophetic friend. Surely it has a better idea – perhaps access to last-minute hotel deals!’

I lifted the projectile in my trembling fingers. ‘O great Arrow of Dodona –’

‘Is he talking to that arrow?’ Lu asked Meg.

‘He talks to inanimate objects,’ Meg told her. ‘Humour him.’

‘We need your advice!’ I said, suppressing the urge to kick Meg in the shin. ‘Where should we go for shelter?’

The arrow’s voice buzzed in my brain*: DIDST THOU CALLEST ME THY FRIEND?* It sounded pleased.

‘Uh, yes.’ I gave my companions a thumbs-up. ‘We need a place to hide out and regroup – somewhere nearby, but away from Nero’s surveillance cameras and whatnot.’

THE EMPEROR’S WHATNOT IS FORMIDABLE INDEED, the arrow agreed. *BUT THOU ALREADY KNOWEST THE ANSWER TO THY QUESTION, O LESTER. SEEKEST THOU THE PLACE OF THE SEVEN-LAYER DIP.*

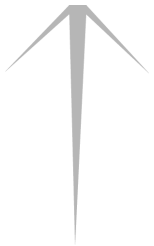
With that, the projectile fell silent.

I groaned in misery. The arrow’s message was perfectly clear. Oh, for the yummy seven-layer dip of our hostess! Oh, for the comfort of that cosy apartment! But it wasn’t right. I couldn’t …

‘What did it say?’ Meg demanded.

I tried to think of an alternative, but I was so tired I couldn’t even lie.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘We go to Percy Jackson’s place.’



4

This child is too cute.
Please, no more adorable.
Whoops. My heart just broke.

‘HELLO, MRS JACKSON! IS PERCY HOME?’

I shivered and dripped on her welcome mat, my two equally bedraggled companions behind me.

For a heartbeat, Sally Jackson remained frozen in her doorway, a smile on her face, as if she’d been expecting a delivery of flowers or cookies. We were not that.

Her driftwood-brown hair was tinselled with more grey than it was six months ago. She wore tattered jeans, a loose green blouse and a blob of apple sauce on the top of her bare left foot. She was not pregnant any more, which probably explained the sound of the giggling baby inside her apartment.

Her surprise passed quickly. Since she’d raised a demigod, she’d doubtless had lots of experience with the unexpected. ‘Apollo! Meg! And –’ She sized up our gigantic tattooed, mohawked train conductor. ‘Hello! You poor things. Come in and dry off.’

The Jackson living room was as cosy as I remembered. The smell of baking mozzarella and tomatoes wafted from

the kitchen. Jazz played on an old-fashioned turntable – ah, Wynton Marsalis! Several comfy sofas and chairs were available to plop upon. I scanned the room for Percy Jackson but found only a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, rumpled khakis, oven mitts and a pink dress shirt covered by a bright-yellow apron splattered with tomato sauce. He was bouncing a giggly baby on his hip. The child's yellow onesie pyjamas matched the man's apron so perfectly that I wondered if they'd come as a set.

I'm sure the chef and baby made for an adorable, heartwarming scene. Unfortunately, I'd grown up on stories about Titans and gods who cooked and/or ate their children, so I was perhaps not quite as charmed as I might have been.

'There is a man in your apartment,' I informed Mrs Jackson.

Sally laughed. 'This is my husband, Paul. Excuse me a sec. I'll be right back.' She dashed towards the bathroom.

'Hi!' Paul smiled at us. 'This is Estelle.'

Estelle giggled and drooled as if her own name was the funniest joke in the universe. She had Percy's sea-green eyes and clearly her mother's good nature. She also had wisps of black and silver hair like Paul, which I had never seen on a baby. She would be the world's first salt-and-pepper toddler. All in all, it seemed Estelle had inherited a good genetic package.

'Hello.' I wasn't sure whether to address Paul, Estelle or whatever was cooking in the kitchen, which smelled delicious. 'Er, not to be rude, but we were hoping to – Oh, thanks, Mrs Jackson.'

Sally had emerged from the bathroom and was now busily wrapping Meg, Lu and me in fluffy turquoise bath towels.

'We were hoping to see Percy,' I finished.

Estelle squealed with delight. She seemed to like the name *Percy* .

‘I’d like to see him, too,’ Sally said. ‘But he’s on his way to the West Coast. With Annabeth. They left a few days ago.’

She pointed to a framed picture on the nearest end table. In the photo, my old friends Percy and Annabeth sat side by side in the Jackson family’s dented Prius, both of them smiling out of the driver’s-side window. In the back seat was our mutual satyr friend Grover Underwood, mugging for the camera – eyes crossed, tongue stuck out sideways, hands flashing peace signs. Annabeth leaned into Percy, her arms wrapped around his neck like she was about to kiss him or possibly choke him. Behind the wheel, Percy gave the camera a big thumbs-up. He seemed to be telling me directly, *We’re outta here! You have fun with your quests or whatever!*

‘He graduated high school,’ Meg said, as if she’d witnessed a miracle.

‘I know,’ Sally said. ‘We even had cake.’ She pointed to another picture of Percy and Sally, beaming as they held up a baby-blue cake with darker blue icing that read CONGRATULATIONS, PERCY THE GRADUTE! I did not ask why *graduate* was misspelled, dyslexia being so common in demigod families.

‘Then –’ I gulped – ‘he’s not here.’

It was a silly thing to say, but some stubborn part of me insisted that Percy Jackson *must* be here somewhere, waiting to do dangerous tasks for me. That was his *job* !

But, no. That was the *old* Apollo’s way of thinking – the Apollo I’d been the last time I was in this apartment. Percy was entitled to his own life. He was trying to have one, and – oh, the bitter truth! – it had nothing to do with me.

‘I’m happy for him,’ I said. ‘And Annabeth …’

Then it occurred to me that they’d probably been incommunicado since they left New York. Cell phones attracted too much monstrous attention for demigods to use, especially on a road trip. Magical means of

communications were slowly coming back online since we'd released the god of silence, Harpocrates, but they were still spotty. Percy and Annabeth might have no idea about all the tragedies we'd faced on the West Coast – at Camp Jupiter, and before that in Santa Barbara …

'Oh, dear,' I muttered to myself. 'I suppose that means they haven't heard –'

Meg coughed loudly. She gave me a hard *shut-up* glare.

Right. It would be cruel to burden Sally and Paul with news of Jason Grace's death, especially when Percy and Annabeth were making their way to California and Sally must already be worried about them.

'Haven't heard what?' Sally asked.

I swallowed dryly. 'That we were coming back to New York. No matter. We'll just –'

'Enough small talk,' Lu interrupted. 'We are in grave danger. These mortals cannot help us. We must go.'

Lu's tone wasn't exactly disdainful – just irritated, and maybe concerned for our hosts. If Nero tracked us to this apartment, he wouldn't spare Percy's family just because they weren't demigods.

On the other hand, the Arrow of Dodona had told us to come here. There had to be a reason. I hoped it had something to do with what Paul was cooking.

Sally studied our large tattooed friend. She didn't look offended, more like she was taking Lu's measure and pondering whether she had any clothes large enough to fit her. 'Well, you can't leave dripping wet. Let's get you some dry things to wear, at least, and some food if you're hungry.'

'Yes, please,' Meg said. 'I love you.'

Estelle burst into a fresh peal of giggles. She had apparently just discovered that her father's fingers could wiggle, and she considered this hilarious.

Sally smiled at her baby, then at Meg. 'I love you, too, dear. Percy's friends are always welcome.'

‘I have no idea who this *Percy* is,’ Lu protested.

‘*Anyone* who needs help is always welcome,’ Sally amended. ‘Believe me, we’ve been in danger before, and we’ve come through it. Right, Paul?’

‘Yep,’ he agreed without hesitation. ‘There’s plenty of food. I think Percy has some clothes that will fit, uh, is it Apollo?’

I nodded morosely. I knew all too well that Percy’s clothes would fit me, because I’d left here six months ago wearing his hand-me-downs. ‘Thank you, Paul.’

Lu grunted. ‘I suppose … Is that lasagne I smell?’

Paul grinned. ‘The Blofis family recipe.’

‘Hm. I suppose we could stay for a bit,’ Lu decided.

The wonders never ceased. The Gaul and I actually agreed on something.

‘Here, try this.’ Paul tossed me a faded Percy T-shirt to go with my ratty Percy jeans.

I did not complain. The clothes were clean, warm and dry, and after trudging underground across half of Manhattan my old outfit smelled so bad it would have to be sealed in a hazardous waste pouch and incinerated.

I sat on Percy’s bed next to Estelle, who lay on her back, staring in fascination at a blue plastic doughnut.

I ran my hand across the faded words on the T-shirt: AHS SWIM TEAM . ‘What does AHS stand for?’

Paul wrinkled his nose. ‘Alternative High School. It was the only place that would take Percy for just his senior year, after … You know.’

I remembered. Percy had disappeared for the entirety of his junior year thanks to the meddling of Hera, who zapped him across the country and gave him amnesia, all for the sake of making the Greek and Roman demigod camps unite for the war with Gaia. My stepmother just loved bringing people together.

‘You didn’t approve of the situation, or the school?’ I asked.

Paul shrugged. He looked uncomfortable, as if saying anything negative would go against his nature.

Estelle gave me a drooling grin. ‘Gah?’ I took this to mean *Can you believe how lucky we are to be alive right now?*

Paul sat next to her and gently cupped his hand over her wispy hair.

‘I’m an English teacher at another high school,’ he said. ‘AHS was … not the best. For kids who are struggling, at risk, you want a safe place with good accommodations and excellent support. You want to understand each student as an individual. Alt High was more like a holding pen for everybody who didn’t fit into the system. Percy had been through so much … I was worried about him. But he made the best of the situation. He *really* wanted to get that diploma. I’m proud of him.’

Estelle cooed. Paul’s eyes wrinkled around the edges. He tapped her nose. ‘Boop.’

The baby was stunned for a millisecond. Then she laughed with such glee I worried she might choke on her own spit.

I found myself staring in amazement at Paul and Estelle, who struck me as even greater miracles than Percy’s graduation. Paul seemed like a caring husband, a loving father, a kind stepfather. In my own experience, such a creature was harder to find than an albino unicorn or three-winged griffin.

As for baby Estelle, her good nature and sense of wonder rose to the level of superpowers. If this child grew up to be as perceptive and charismatic as she appeared to be now, she would rule the world. I decided not to tell Zeus about her.

‘Paul …’ I ventured. ‘Aren’t you worried about having us here? We might endanger your family.’

The corners of his mouth tightened. ‘I was at the Battle of Manhattan. I’ve heard about some of the horrible things Sally went through – fighting the Minotaur, being imprisoned in the Underworld. And Percy’s adventures?’ He shook his head in respect. ‘Percy has put himself on the line for us, for his friends, for the world, plenty of times. So, can I risk giving you a place to catch your breath, some fresh clothes and a hot meal? Yeah, how could I not?’

‘You are a good man, Paul Blofis.’

He tilted his head, as if wondering what other kind of man anyone would possibly try to be. ‘Well, I’ll leave you to get cleaned up and dressed. We don’t want dinner to get burned, do we, Estelle?’

The baby went into a fit of giggles as her father scooped her up and carried her out of the room.

I took my time in the shower. I needed a good scrubbing, yes. But mostly I needed to stand with my forehead against the tiles, shaking and weeping until I felt like I could face other people again.

What was it about kindness? In my time as Lester Papadopoulos, I had learned to stand up under horrendous verbal abuse and constant life-threatening violence, but the smallest act of generosity could ninja-kick me right in the heart and break me into a blubbering mess of emotions.

Darn you, Paul and Sally, and your cute baby, too!

How could I repay them for providing me this temporary refuge? I felt like I owed them the same thing I owed Camp Jupiter and Camp Half-Blood, the Waystation and the Cistern, Piper and Frank and Hazel and Leo and, yes, especially Jason Grace. I owed them *everything* .

How could I not?

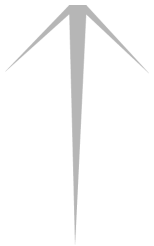
Once I was dressed, I staggered out to the dining area. Everyone was seated around the table except Estelle, who Paul informed me was down for the night. No doubt all that pure joy required a great amount of energy.

Meg wore a new pink smock dress and white leggings. If she cherished these as much as the last outfit Sally had given her, she would end up wearing them until they fell off her body in burned-and-shredded rags. Together with her red high-tops – which thankfully had been well cleaned – she sported a Valentine's Day colour theme that seemed quite out of character, unless you considered her sweetheart to be the mountain of garlic bread she was shovelling into her mouth.

Lu was dressed in an XXL men's work shirt with ELECTRONICS MEGA - MART stitched over the pocket. She wore a fluffy turquoise towel around her waist like a kilt, because, she informed me, the only other trousers in the apartment large enough to fit her were Sally's old maternity trousers and, no thank you, Lu would just wait for hers to get out of the dryer.

Sally and Paul provided us with heaping plates of salad, lasagne and garlic bread. It wasn't Sally's famous seven-layer dip, but it *was* a family-style feast like I hadn't experienced since the Waystation. That memory gave me a twinge of melancholy. I wondered how everyone there was doing: Leo, Calypso, Emmie, Jo, little Georgina … At the time, our trials in Indianapolis had felt like a nightmare, but in retrospect they seemed like happier, simpler days.

Sally Jackson sat down and smiled. 'Well, this is nice.' Shockingly, she sounded sincere. 'We don't have guests often. Now, let's eat, and you can tell us who or what is trying to kill you this time.'



5

No swearing at the
Table? Then don't talk about
That #@$%-@& Nero.*

I WISHED WE COULD HAVE HAD REGULAR small talk around the dinner table: the weather, who liked whom at school, which gods were casting plagues on which cities and why. But *no* , it was always about who was trying to kill me.

I didn't want to ruin anyone's appetite, especially since Paul's savoury family-recipe lasagne was making me drool like Estelle. Also, I wasn't sure I trusted Luguselwa enough to share our whole story.

Meg had no such qualms. She opened up about everything we'd been through – with the exception of the tragic deaths. I was sure she only skipped those to spare Sally and Paul from worrying too much about Percy.

I don't think I'd ever heard Meg talk as much as she did at Sally and Paul's dinner table, as if the presence of kindly parental figures had uncorked something inside her.

Meg told them of our battles with Commodus and Caligula. She explained how we had freed four ancient Oracles and had now returned to New York to face the last

and most powerful emperor, Nero. Paul and Sally listened intently, interrupting only to express concern or sympathy. When Sally looked at me and said, 'You poor dear,' I almost lost it again. I wanted to cry on her shoulder. I wanted Paul to dress me in a yellow onesie and rock me until I fell asleep.

'So, Nero is after you,' Paul said at last. '*The* Nero. A Roman emperor has set up his evil lair in a Midtown high-rise.'

He sat back and placed his hands on the table, as if trying to digest the news along with the meal. 'I guess that's not the craziest thing I've ever heard. And now you have to do what … defeat him in combat? Another Battle of Manhattan?'

I shuddered. 'I hope not. The battle with Commodus and Caligula was … hard for Camp Jupiter. If I asked Camp Half-Blood to attack Nero's base –'

'No.' Lu dipped her garlic bread in her salad dressing, proving her barbarian bona fides. 'A large-scale assault would be suicide. Nero is expecting one. He's *hoping* for one. He's prepared to cause massive collateral damage.'

Outside, rain lashed the windows. Lightning boomed as if Zeus were warning me not to get too comfortable with these kindly surrogate parents.

As much as I distrusted Luguselwa, I believed what she said. Nero would relish a fight, despite what had happened to his two compadres in the Bay Area, or maybe *because* of it. I was afraid to ask what Lu meant by *massive collateral damage* .

An all-out war with Nero would not be another Battle of Manhattan. When Kronos's army had stormed the Empire State Building, entrance to Mount Olympus, the Titan Morpheus had put all the mortals in the city to sleep. The damage to the city itself, and its human population, had been negligible.

Nero didn’t work that way. He liked drama. He would welcome chaos, screaming crowds, countless civilian deaths. This was a man who burned people alive to illuminate his garden parties.

‘There has to be another way,’ I decided. ‘I won’t let any more innocents suffer on my account.’

Sally Jackson crossed her arms. In spite of the grim matters we were discussing, she smiled. ‘You’ve grown up.’

I assumed she was talking about Meg. Over the last few months, my young friend had indeed got taller and – Wait. Was Sally referring to *me* ?

My first thought: preposterous! I was four thousand years old. I didn’t *grow up* .

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. ‘The last time you were here, you were so lost. So … well, if you don’t mind me saying –’

‘Pathetic,’ I blurted out. ‘Whiny, entitled, selfish. I felt terribly sorry for myself.’

Meg nodded along with my words as if listening to her favourite song. ‘You *still* feel sorry for yourself.’

‘But now,’ Sally said, sitting back again, ‘you’re more … human, I suppose.’

There was that word again: *human* , which not long ago I would have considered a terrible insult. Now, every time I heard it, I thought of Jason Grace’s admonition: *Remember what it’s like to be human.*

He hadn’t meant all the terrible things about being human, of which there were plenty. He’d meant the *best* things: standing up for a just cause, putting others first, having stubborn faith that you could make a difference, even if it meant you had to die to protect your friends and what you believed in. These were not the kind of feelings that gods had … well, ever.

Sally Jackson meant the term in the same way Jason had – as something worth aspiring to.

‘Thank you,’ I managed.

She nodded. ‘So how can we help?’

Lu slurped the last of the lasagne from her plate. ‘You’ve done more than enough, Jackson Mother and Blofis Father. We must go.’

Meg glanced out of the window at the thunderstorm, then at the remaining garlic bread in the basket. ‘Maybe we could stay until the morning?’

‘That’s a good idea,’ Paul agreed. ‘We have plenty of space. If Nero’s men are out there searching for you in the dark and the lashing rain … wouldn’t you rather they be out there while you’re in here, warm and comfortable?’

Lu seemed to consider this. She belched, long and deep, which in her culture was probably a sign of appreciation, or a sign that she had gas.

‘Your words are sensible, Blofis Father. Your lasagne is good. Very well. I suppose the cameras will see us better in the morning anyway.’

‘Cameras?’ I sat up. ‘As in Nero’s surveillance cameras? I thought we don’t want to be seen.’

Lu shrugged. ‘I have a plan.’

‘A plan like the one on the train? Because –’

‘Listen here, small Lester –’

‘Hold it,’ Paul ordered. His voice was calm but firm, giving me an inkling as to how this kind, gentle man could control a classroom. ‘Let’s not argue. We’ll wake Estelle. I guess I should have asked this before, but, uh …’ He glanced between Meg, me and Lu. ‘How exactly do you know each other?’

‘Lu held us hostage on a train,’ I said.

‘I *saved* you from capture on a train,’ she corrected.

‘Lu’s my guardian,’ Meg said.

That got everyone’s attention.

Sally raised her eyebrows. Lu’s ears turned bright red.

Paul’s face remained in teacher mode. I could imagine him asking Meg to elaborate on her statement, to provide three examples in a well-argued paragraph.

‘Guardian in what sense, Meg?’ he asked.

Lu glanced at the girl. The Gaul had a strange look of hurt in her eyes as she waited for Meg to describe their relationship.

Meg pushed her fork across her plate. ‘Legally. Like, if I needed somebody to sign stuff. Or pick me up from the police station or … whatever.’

The more I thought about this, the less absurd it seemed. Nero wouldn’t bother with the technicalities of parenthood. Signing a permission slip? Taking Meg to the doctor? No, thanks. He would delegate such things. And legal status? Nero didn’t care about formal guardianship. In his mind, he *owned* Meg.

‘Lu taught me swords.’ Meg squirmed in her new pink dress. ‘She taught me … well, most stuff. When I lived in the palace, Nero’s tower, Lu tried to help me. She was … She was the nice one.’

I studied the giant Gaul in her Electronics Mega-Mart shirt and her bath-towel kilt. I could think of many descriptions for her. *Nice* wasn’t the first one that sprang to mind.

However, I *could* imagine her being nicer than Nero. That was a low bar. And I could imagine Nero using Lu as his proxy – giving Meg another authority figure to look up to, a woman warrior. After dealing with Nero and his terrifying alternate personality the Beast, Meg would have seen Lu as a welcome relief.

‘You were the good cop,’ I guessed.

Lu’s neck veins bulged against her golden torque. ‘Call me what you like. I didn’t do enough for my Sapling, but I did what I could. She and I trained together for years.’

‘Sapling?’ Paul asked. ‘Oh, right. Because Meg’s a daughter of Demeter.’ His expression remained serious, but his eyes twinkled, like he couldn’t believe he was lucky enough to be having this conversation.

I didn’t feel quite as fortunate. I was gripping my fork so tightly my fist trembled. The gesture might have looked threatening if the tines hadn’t been topped with a cherry tomato.

‘You were Meg’s *legal* guardian.’ I glared at Lu. ‘You could have taken her out of that tower. You could have relocated. Run with her. But you stayed. For years.’

‘Hey,’ Meg warned.

‘No, he’s right.’ Lu’s eyes bored a hole in the casserole dish. ‘I owed Nero my life. Back in the old times, he spared me from … Well, it doesn’t matter now, but I served him for centuries. I’ve done many hard things for him. Then the sapling came along. I did my best. Wasn’t enough. Then Meg ran away with you. I heard what Nero was planning, what would happen when you two came back to the city …’ She shook her head. ‘It was too much. I couldn’t bring Meg back to that tower.’

‘You followed your conscience,’ Sally said.

I wished I could be as forgiving as our hostess. ‘Nero doesn’t hire warriors for their consciences.’

The big woman scowled. ‘That’s true, little Lester. Believe me, or don’t. But if we can’t work together, if you don’t listen to me, then Nero will win. He’ll destroy all of this.’

She gestured around the room. Whether she meant the world, Manhattan or the Jackson/Blofis apartment, any of those possibilities was unacceptable.

‘I believe you,’ Sally announced.

It seemed ridiculous that a huge warrior like Lu would care about Sally Jackson’s approval, but the Gaul looked genuinely relieved. Her facial muscles relaxed. The elongated Celtic tattoos on her arms settled back into concentric circles. ‘Thank you, Jackson Mother.’

‘I believe you, too.’ Meg frowned at me, her meaning clear: *And so will you, or I’ll order you to run into a wall.*

I set down my tomato-topped fork. It was the best gesture of peace I could offer.

I couldn't make myself trust Luguselwa completely. A 'good cop' was still a cop … still a part of the mind game. And Nero was an expert at playing with people's heads. I glanced at Paul, hoping for support, but he gave me an almost imperceptible shrug: *What else can you do?*

'Very well, Luguselwa,' I said. 'Tell us your plan.'

Paul and Sally leaned forward, ready for marching orders.

Lu shook her head. 'Not you, my good hosts. I have no doubt you are brave and strong, but I will not see any harm come to this family.'

I nodded. 'On that, at least, we agree. Once the morning comes, we're out of here. Possibly after a good breakfast, if it's not too much trouble.'

Sally smiled, though there was a tinge of disappointment in her eyes, as if she'd been looking forward to busting some evil Roman heads. 'I still want to hear the plan. What will you do?'

'Best to not share too many details,' Lu said. 'But there is a secret way into Nero's tower – from below. It is the way that Nero takes to visit … the reptile.'

Coils of lasagne seemed to tighten in my stomach. *The reptile.* Python. Interloper at Delphi, my archnemesis and winner of *Olympus Magazine* 's Least Popular Serpent award for four thousand years running.

'That sounds like a terrible way in,' I noted.

'It is not wonderful,' Lu agreed.

'But we can use it to sneak in,' Meg guessed. 'Surprise Nero?'

Lu snorted. 'Nothing so easy, Sapling. The way is secret, but it is still heavily guarded and under constant surveillance. If you tried to sneak in, you would be caught.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm still not hearing anything resembling a plan.'

Lu took a moment to gather her patience. I was familiar with this look. I got it often from Meg, and my sister

Artemis, and … well, everyone, actually.

'The way is not for you,' she said. 'But it *could* be used to sneak in a small squad of demigods, if any were brave enough and sufficiently skilled at navigating underground.'

Son of Hades, I thought, the amphisbaena's words echoing in my head, *cavern-runners' friend, / Must show the secret way unto the throne.*

The only thing more unsettling than not understanding a prophecy was beginning to understand it.

'Then *they* would just get captured,' I said.

'Not necessarily,' Lu said. 'Not if Nero were sufficiently distracted.'

I had a feeling I was not going to like the answer to my next question. 'Distracted by what?'

'Your surrender,' Lu said.

I waited. Lu did not seem the type for practical jokes, but this would have been a good moment for her to laugh and yell *NOT!*

'You can't be serious,' I said.

'I'm with Apollo,' Sally said. 'If Nero wants to kill him, why would he –?'

'It's the only way.' Lu took a deep breath. 'Listen, I know how Nero thinks. When I return to him and tell him you two got away, he will issue an ultimatum.'

Paul frowned. 'To whom?'

'Camp Half-Blood,' Lu said. 'Any demigods, any allies anywhere who are harbouring Apollo. Nero's terms will be simple: Apollo and Meg surrender themselves within a certain amount of time, or Nero destroys New York.'

I wanted to laugh. It seemed impossible, ridiculous. Then I remembered Caligula's yachts in San Francisco Bay, launching a barrage of Greek-fire projectiles that would have destroyed the entire East Bay if Lavinia Asimov hadn't sabotaged them. Nero would have at least as many resources at his disposal, and Manhattan was a much more densely populated target.

Would he burn his own city, with his own palatial tower in the middle of it?

Dumb question, Apollo. Nero had done it before. Just ask Ancient Rome.

'So you rescued us,' I said, 'just to tell us we should surrender to Nero. That's your plan.'

'Nero must believe he has already won,' Lu said. 'Once he has you two in his grasp, he will relax his guard. This may give your demigod team a chance to infiltrate the tower from below.'

'*May* ,' I echoed.

'The timing will be tricky,' Lu admitted, 'but Nero will keep you alive for a while, Apollo. He and the reptile … They have plans for you.'

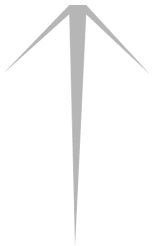
A distant thunderclap shook my chair. Either that, or I was trembling. I could imagine what sort of plans Nero and Python might have for me. None of them included a nice lasagne dinner.

'And, Sapling,' Lu continued, 'I know it will be hard for you, going back to that place, but I will be there to protect you, as I've done many times before. I will be your inside woman. When your friends invade, I can free you both. Then, together, we can take down the emperor.'

Why did Meg look so pensive, as if she were actually considering this insane strategy?

'Just a minute,' I protested. 'Even if we trust you, why would *Nero* ? You say you'll go back to him with your tail between your legs and report that we got away. Why would he believe that? Why won't he suspect you've turned on him?'

'I have a plan for that, too,' Lu said. 'It involves you pushing me off a building.'



6

Bye, Luguselwa.
Don't forget to write if you
Ever hit the ground.

I'D HEARD WORSE PLANS.

But while the idea of pushing Lu off a building had a certain appeal, I was sceptical that she really meant it, especially since she wouldn't explain further or offer us details.

'Tomorrow,' she insisted. 'Once we're on our way.'

The next morning, Sally made us breakfast. Estelle giggled at us hysterically. Paul apologized for not having a car to lend us, since the family Prius, which we usually crashed, was on its way to California with Percy, Grover and Annabeth. The best Paul could offer us was a subway pass, but I wasn't ready to ride any more trains.

Sally gave us all hugs and wished us well. Then she said she had to get back to baking cookies, which she did to relieve stress while she was working on the revisions for her second novel.

This raised many questions for me. Second novel? We hadn't discussed her writing at all the night before. Cookies? Could we wait until they were done?

But I suspected that good food was a never-ending temptation here at the Jackson/Blofis home. There would always be a next sweet or savoury snack that was more appealing than facing the harsh world.

Also, I respected the fact that Sally needed to work. As the god of poetry, I understood revisions. Facing monsters and imperial mercenaries was much easier.

At least the rain had stopped, leaving us a steamy June morning. Lu, Meg and I headed towards the East River on foot, ducking from alley to alley until Lu found a location that seemed to satisfy her.

Just off First Avenue, a ten-storey apartment building was in the process of a gut renovation. Its brick facade was a hollow shell, its windows empty frames. We sneaked through the alley behind the lot, climbed over a chain-link construction fence, and found the back entrance blocked only by a sheet of plywood. Lu broke through it with one sturdy kick.

'After you,' she said.

I eyed the dark doorway. 'We really have to go through with this?'

'I'm the one who has to fall off the roof,' she muttered. 'Stop complaining.'

The building's interior was reinforced with metal scaffolding – rung ladders leading from one level to the next. Oh, good. After climbing Sutro Tower, I just *loved* the idea of more ladders. Rays of sunlight sliced through the structure's hollow interior, swirling up dust clouds and miniature rainbows. Above us, the roof was still intact. From the topmost tier of scaffolding, a final ladder led up to a landing with a metal door.

Lu began to climb. She had changed back into her Amtrak disguise so she wouldn't have to explain the Electronics Mega-Mart shirt to Nero. I followed in my Percy Jackson hand-me-downs. My funny valentine, Meg, brought up the rear. Just like old times at Sutro Tower, except with

one hundred percent less Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano and one hundred percent more tattooed Gaul.

On each level, Meg stopped to sneeze and wipe her nose. Lu did her best to stay away from the windows, as if worried that Nero might burst through one and yell, *Boare!*

(I'm pretty sure that was Latin for *boo!* It's been a while since I attended one of Cicero's famous haunted-house parties. That man did love to put a toga over his head and scare his guests.)

Finally, we reached the metal door, which had been spray-painted with a red-stencilled warning, ROOF ACCESS RESTRICTED . I was sweaty and out of breath. Lu seemed unperturbed by the climb. Meg kicked absently at the nearest brick as if wondering whether she could collapse the building.

'Here's the plan,' Lu said. 'I know for a fact Nero has cameras in the office building across the street. It's one of his properties. When we burst out this door, his surveillance team should get some good footage of us on the roof.'

'Remind us why that's a good thing?' I asked.

Lu muttered something under her breath, perhaps a prayer for her Celtic gods to smack me upside the head. 'Because we're going to let Nero see what we *want* him to see. We're going to put on a show.'

Meg nodded. 'Like on the train.'

'Exactly,' Lu said. 'You two run out first. I'll follow a few steps behind, like I've finally cornered you and am ready to kill you.'

'In a strictly play-acting way,' I hoped.

'It has to look real,' Lu said.

'We can do it.' Meg turned to me with a look of pride. 'You saw us on the train, Lester, and that was with no planning. When I lived at the tower? Lu would help me fake these incredible battles so Father – Nero, I mean – would think I killed my opponents.'

I stared at her. ‘Kill. Your opponents.’

‘Like servants, or prisoners, or just people he didn’t like. Lu and I would work it out beforehand. I’d pretend to kill them. Fake blood and everything. Then, after, Lu would drag them out of the arena and let them go. The deaths looked so real that Nero never caught on.’

I couldn’t decide what I found most horrifying: Meg’s uncomfortable slip calling Nero *Father* , or the fact that Nero had expected his young stepdaughter to execute prisoners for his amusement, or the fact that Lu had conspired to make the show non-lethal to spare Meg’s feelings rather than – oh, I don’t know – refusing to do Nero’s dirty work in the first place and getting Meg out of that house of horrors.

And are you any better? taunted a small voice in my brain. *How many times have you stood up to Zeus?*

Okay, small voice. Fair point. Tyrants are not easy to oppose or walk away from, especially when you depend on them for everything.

I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth. ‘What’s my role?’

‘Meg and I will do most of the fighting.’ Lu hefted her crossbow. ‘Apollo, you stumble around and cower in fear.’

‘I can do that.’

‘Then, when it looks like I’m about to kill Meg, you scream and charge me. You have bursts of godly strength from time to time, I’ve heard.’

‘I can’t summon one on command!’

‘You don’t have to. Pretend. Push me as hard as you can – right off the roof. I’ll let you do it.’

I looked over the scaffold railing. ‘We’re ten stories up. I know this because … we’re ten stories up.’

‘Yes,’ Lu agreed. ‘Should be about right. I don’t die easily, little Lester. I’ll break some bones, no doubt, but with luck, I’ll survive.’

‘With luck?’ Meg suddenly didn’t sound so confident.

Lu summoned a scimitar into her free hand. ‘We have to risk it, Sapling. Nero has to believe I did my very best to catch you. If he suspects something … Well, we can’t have that.’ She faced me. ‘Ready?’

‘No!’ I said. ‘You still haven’t explained how Nero intends to burn down the city, or what we’re supposed to do once we get captured.’

Lu’s fiery look was quite convincing. I actually *believed* she wanted to kill me. ‘He has Greek fire. More than Caligula did. More than anyone else has ever dared to stockpile. He has some delivery system in place. I don’t know the details. But as soon as he suspects something is wrong, one push of a button and it’s all over. That’s why we have to go through this elaborate charade. We have to get you inside without him realizing it’s a trick.’

I was trembling again. I stared down at the concrete floor and imagined it disintegrating, dropping into a sea of green flame. ‘So what happens when we’re captured?’

‘The holding cells,’ Lu said. ‘They’re very close to the vault where Nero keeps his *fasces* .’

My spirits rose at least a millimetre. This wasn’t good news, exactly, but at least Lu’s plan now seemed a little less insane. The emperor’s fasces, the golden axe that symbolized his power, would be connected to Nero’s life force. In San Francisco, we’d destroyed the *fasces* of Commodus and Caligula and weakened the emperors just enough to kill them. If we could do the same to Nero …

‘So you break us out of our cells,’ I guessed, ‘and lead us to this vault.’

‘That’s the idea.’ Lu’s expression turned grim. ‘Of course, the fasces is guarded by … well, something terrible.’

‘What?’ Meg asked.

Lu’s hesitation scared me worse than any monster she might have named. ‘Let’s deal with that later. One impossible thing at a time.’

Yet again I found myself agreeing with the Gaul. This worried me.

'Okay, then,' she said. 'Lester, after you push me off the roof, you and Meg get to Camp Half-Blood as fast as you can, find a demigod team to infiltrate the tunnels. Nero's people won't be far behind you.'

'But we don't have a car.'

'Ah. Almost forgot.' Lu glanced down at her belt as if she wanted to grab something, then realized her hands were full of weapons. 'Sapling, reach into my pouch.'

Meg opened the small leather bag. She gasped at whatever she saw inside, then pulled it out tightly clutched in her hand, not letting me see.

'Really?' She bounced up and down with excitement. 'I get to?'

Lu chuckled. 'Why not? Special occasion.'

'Yay!' Meg slipped whatever it was into one of her gardening pouches.

I felt like I'd missed something important. 'Um, what –?'

'Enough chat,' Lu said. 'Ready? Run!'

I was not ready, but I'd got used to being told to run. My body reacted for me, and Meg and I burst through the door.

We scrambled over the silver tar surface, dodging air vents and stumbling on loose bricks. I got into my role with depressing ease. Running for my life, terrified and helpless? Over the last six months, I'd rehearsed that plenty.

Lu bellowed and charged after us. Twin crossbow bolts whistled past my ear. She was *really* selling the whole 'murderous Gaul' thing. My heart leaped into my throat as if I were actually in mortal danger.

Too quickly, I reached the edge of the roof. Nothing but a waist-high lip of brick separated me from a hundred-foot drop into the alley below. I turned and screamed as Lu's blade slashed towards my face.

I arched backwards – not fast enough. Her blade sliced a thin line across my forehead.

Meg materialized, screaming with rage. She blocked the Gaul's next strike and forced her to turn. Lu dropped her crossbow and summoned her second blade, and the two dimachaeri went at it in a full-bore dramatic interpretation of kung-fu Cuisinarts.

I stumbled, too stunned to feel pain. I wondered why warm rain was trickling into my eyes. Then I wiped it away, looked at my fingers and realized, *Nope, that's not rain* . Rain wasn't usually bright red.

Meg's swords flashed, driving the big Gaul back. Lu kicked her in the gut and sent her reeling.

My thoughts were sluggish, pushing through a syrupy haze of shock, but I seemed to remember I had a role in this drama. What was I supposed to do after the running and the cowering?

Oh, yes. I was supposed to throw Lu off the roof.

A giggle bubbled up in my lungs. I couldn't see with the blood in my eyes. My hands and feet felt like water balloons – wobbly and warm and about to burst. But, sure, no problem. I would just throw a huge dual-sword-wielding warrior off the roof.

I staggered forward.

Lu thrust with her left blade, stabbing Meg in the thigh. Meg yelped and stumbled, crossing her swords just in time to catch Lu's next strike, which would have cleaved her head in two.

Wait a second. This fight *couldn't* be an act. Pure rage lit the Gaul's eyes.

Lu had deceived us, and Meg was in real danger.

Fury swelled inside me. A flood of heat burned away the haze and filled me with godly power. I bellowed like one of Poseidon's sacred bulls at the altar. (And, let me tell you, those bulls did not go gently to the slaughter.) I barrelled towards Luguselwa, who turned, wide-eyed, but had no

time to defend herself. I tackled her around the waist, lifted her over my head as easily as if she were a medicine ball and tossed her off the side of the building.

I overdid it. Rather than dropping into the alley, she sailed over the rooftops of the next block and disappeared. A half second later, a distant metallic *clunk* echoed from the canyon of First Avenue, followed by the angry *weep-weep-weep* of a car alarm.

My strength evaporated. I wobbled and fell to my knees, blood trickling down my face.

Meg stumbled over to me. Her new white leggings were soaked through from the wound on her thigh.

'Your head,' she murmured.

'I know. Your leg.'

She fumbled through her gardening pouches until she found two rolls of gauze. We did our best to mummify each other and stop the bleeding. Meg's fingers trembled. Tears welled in her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' I told her. 'I didn't mean to throw Lu so far. I just – I thought she was really trying to kill you.'

Meg peered in the direction of First Avenue. 'It's fine. She's tough. She's – she's probably fine.'

'But –'

'No time to talk. Come on.'

She grabbed my waist and pulled me up. We somehow made it back inside, then managed to navigate the scaffolds and ladders to get out of the hollow apartment building. As we limped to the nearest intersection, my heartbeat flumped irregularly, like a trout on the floorboards of a boat. (Ugh. I had Poseidon on the brain now.)

I imagined a caravan of shiny black SUVs full of Germani roaring towards us, encircling our location to take us into custody. If Nero had indeed seen what had happened on that rooftop, it was only a matter of time. We'd given him quite a show. He would want our autographs, followed by our heads on a silver plate.

At the corner of Eighty-First and First, I scanned the traffic. No sign of Germani yet. No monsters. No police or civilians screaming that they'd just witnessed a Gaulish warrior fall from the sky.

'What now?' I asked, really hoping Meg had an answer.

From her belt pouches, Meg fished out the item Lu had given her: a shiny golden Roman coin. Despite everything we'd just been through, I detected a gleam of excitement in my young friend's eyes.

'Now I summon a ride,' she said.

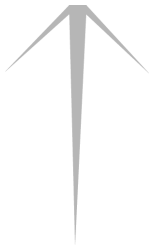
With a cold flush of dread, I understood what she was talking about. I realized why Luguselwa had given her that coin, and part of me wished I had thrown the Gaul a few more blocks.

'Oh, no,' I pleaded. 'You can't mean them. Not them!'

'They're great,' Meg insisted.

'No, they are *not* great! They're awful!'

'Maybe don't tell them that,' Meg said, then she threw the coin into the street and yelled in Latin, '*Stop, O Chariot of Damnation!*'



7

Chariot of dam-
nation, why stoppest thou here?
I don't use your app.

CALL ME SUPERSTITIOUS. IF YOU'RE GOING to hail a chariot, you should at least try for one that doesn't have *damnation* right there in the name.

Meg's coin hit the road and disappeared in a flash. Instantly, a car-size section of asphalt liquefied into a boiling pool of blood and tar. (At least that's what it looked like. I did not test the ingredients.) A taxi erupted from the goo like a submarine breaking the surface. It was similar to a standard New York cab, but grey instead of yellow: the colour of dust, or tombstones, or probably my face at that moment. Painted across the door were the words GREY SISTERS . Inside, sitting shoulder to shoulder across the driver's bench, were the three old hags (excuse me, the three *mature female siblings*) themselves.

The passenger-side window rolled down. The sister riding shotgun stuck out her head and croaked, 'Passage? Passage?'

She was just as lovely as I remembered: a face like a rubber Halloween mask, sunken craters where her eyes

should have been and a cobweb-and-linen shawl over her bristly white hair.

'Hello, Tempest.' I sighed. 'It's been a while.'

She tilted her head. 'Who's that? Don't recognize your voice. Passage or not? We have other fares!'

'It is I,' I said miserably. 'The god Apollo.'

Tempest sniffed the air. She smacked her lips, running her tongue over her single yellow tooth. 'Don't sound like Apollo. Don't smell like Apollo. Let me bite you.'

'Um, no,' I said. 'You'll have to take my word for it. We need –'

'Wait.' Meg looked at me in wonder. 'You *know* the Grey Sisters?'

She said this as if I'd been holding out on her – as if I knew all three founding members of Bananarama and had not yet got Meg their autographs. (My history with Bananarama – how I introduced them to the actual Venus and inspired their number-one hit cover of that song – is a story for another time.) 'Yes, Meg,' I said. 'I am a god. I know people.'

Tempest grunted. 'Don't smell like a god.' She yelled at the sister on her left: 'Wasp, take a gander. Who is this guy?'

The middle sister shoved her way to the window. She looked almost exactly like Tempest – to tell them apart, you'd have to have known them for a few millennia, which, unfortunately, I had – but today she had the trio's single communal eye: a slimy, milky orb that peered at me from the depths of her left socket.

As unhappy as I was to see her again, I was even more unhappy that, by process of elimination, the third sister, Anger, had to be driving the taxi. Having Anger behind the wheel was never a good thing.

'It's some mortal boy with a blood-soaked bandanna on his head,' Wasp pronounced after ogling me. 'Not interesting. Not a god.'

‘That’s just hurtful,’ I said. ‘It *is* me. Apollo.’

Meg threw her hands up. ‘Does it matter? I paid a coin. Can we get in, please?’

You might think Meg had a point. Why did I want to reveal myself? The thing was, the Grey Sisters would not take regular mortals in their cab. Also, given my history with them, I thought it best to be up-front about my identity, rather than have the Grey Sisters find out halfway through the ride and chuck me out of a moving vehicle.

‘Ladies,’ I said, using the term loosely, ‘I may not look like Apollo, but I assure you it’s me, trapped in this mortal body. Otherwise, how could I know so much about you?’

‘Like what?’ demanded Tempest.

‘Your favourite nectar flavour is caramel crème,’ I said. ‘Your favourite Beatle is Ringo. For centuries, all three of you had a massive crush on Ganymede, but now you like –’

‘He’s Apollo!’ Wasp yelped.

‘Definitely Apollo!’ Tempest wailed. ‘Annoying! Knows things!’

‘Let me in,’ I said, ‘and I’ll shut up.’

That wasn’t an offer I usually made.

The back-door lock popped up. I held the door open for Meg.

She grinned. ‘Who do they like now?’

I mouthed, *Tell you later.*

Inside, we strapped ourselves in with black chain seat belts. The bench was about as comfortable as a beanbag stuffed with silverware.

Behind the wheel, the third sister, Anger, grumbled, ‘Where to?’

I said, ‘Camp –’

Anger hit the gas. My head slammed into the backrest, and Manhattan blurred into a light-speed smear. I hoped Anger understood I meant Camp *Half-Blood* , or we might end up at Camp Jupiter, Camp David or Campobello, New

Brunswick, though I suspected those were outside the Grey Sisters' regular service area.

The cab's TV monitor flickered to life. An orchestra and a studio audience laugh track blared from the speaker. 'Every night at eleven!' an announcer said. 'It's … *Late Night with Thalia!* '

I mashed the OFF button as fast as I could.

'I like the commercials,' Meg complained.

'They'll rot your brain,' I said.

In truth, *Late Night with Thalia!* had once been my favourite show. Thalia (the Muse of comedy, not my demigod comrade Thalia Grace) had invited me on dozens of times as the featured musical guest. I'd sat on her sofa, traded jokes with her, played her silly games like Smite that City! and Prank Call Prophecy. But now I didn't want any more reminders of my former divine life.

Not that I missed it. I was … Yes, I'm going to say it. I was *embarrassed* by the things I used to consider important. Ratings. Worshippers. The rise and fall of civilizations that liked me best. What were these things compared to keeping my friends safe? New York could *not* burn. Little Estelle Blofis had to grow up free to giggle and dominate the planet. Nero had to pay. I could not have got my face nearly chopped off that morning and thrown Luguselwa into a parked car two blocks away for nothing.

Meg appeared unfazed by my dark mood and her own wounded leg.

Deprived of commercials, she sat back and watched the blur of landscape out of the window – the East River, then Queens, zipping by at a speed that mortal commuters could only dream of … which, to be fair, was anything above ten miles an hour. Anger steered, completely blind, as Wasp occasionally called out course corrections. 'Left. Brake. Left. No, the other left!'

'So cool,' Meg said. 'I love this cab.'

I frowned. 'Have you taken the Grey Sisters' cab often?'

My tone was the same as one might say *You enjoy homework?*

'It was a special treat,' Meg said. 'When Lu decided I'd trained really well, we'd go for rides.'

I tried to wrap my mind around the concept of this mode of transportation as a treat. Truly, the emperor's household was a twisted, evil place.

'The girl has taste!' Wasp cried. 'We *are* the best way around the New York area! Don't trust those ride-sharing services! Most of them are run by unlicensed harpies.'

'Harpies!' Tempest howled.

'Stealing our business!' Anger agreed.

I had a momentary vision of our friend Ella behind the wheel of a car. It made me almost glad to be in this taxi. Almost.

'We've upgraded our service, too!' Tempest boasted.

I forced myself to focus on her eye sockets. 'How?'

'You can use our app!' she said. 'You don't have to summon us with gold coins any more!'

She pointed to a sign on the Plexiglas partition. Apparently, I could now link my favourite magic weapon to their cab and pay via virtual drachma using something called GREY RYYD .

I shuddered to think what the Arrow of Dodona might do if I allowed it to make online purchases. If I ever got back to Olympus, I'd find my accounts frozen and my palace in foreclosure because the arrow had bought every known copy of Shakespeare's First Folio.

'Cash is fine,' I said.

Wasp grumbled to Anger, 'You and your predictions. I told you the app was a stupid idea.'

'Stopping for Apollo was stupider,' she muttered back. 'That was *your* prediction.'

'You're both stupid!' snapped Tempest. 'That's *my* prediction!'

The reasons for my long-standing dislike of the Grey Sisters were starting to come back to me. It wasn't just that they were ugly, rude, gross and smelled of grave rot. Or that the three of them shared one eye, one tooth and zero social skills.

It wasn't even the awful job they did hiding their celebrity crushes. In Ancient Greek days, they'd had a crush on me, which was uncomfortable, but at least understandable. Then – if you can believe it – they got over me. For the past few centuries they'd been in the Ganymede Fan Club. Their Instagod posts about how hot he was got so annoying, I finally had to leave a snarky comment. You know that meme with the honey bear and the caption *honey, he gay* ? Yes, I created that. And in Ganymede's case, it was hardly news.

These days they'd decided to have a collective crush on Deimos, the god of fear, which just made no romantic sense to me. Sure, he's buff, and he has nice eyes, but …

Wait. What was I talking about again?

Oh, right. The biggest friction between the Grey Sisters and me was professional jealousy.

I was a god of prophecy. The Grey Sisters told the future, too, but they weren't under my corporate umbrella. They paid me no tribute, no royalties, nothing. They got their wisdom from … Actually, I didn't know. Rumour had it they were born of the primal sea gods, created from swirls of foam and scum, so they knew little bits of wisdom and prophecy that got swept up in the tides. Whatever the case, I didn't like them poaching my territory, and for some inexplicable reason, they didn't like me back.

Their predictions … Hold on. I did a mental rewind. 'Did you say something about *predicting* you would pick me up?'

'Ha!' Tempest said. 'Wouldn't you like to know!'

Anger cackled. 'As if we would share that bit of doggerel we have for you –'

‘Shut up, Anger!’ Wasp slapped her sister. ‘He didn’t ask yet!’

Meg perked up. ‘You have a dog for Apollo?’

I cursed under my breath. I saw where this conversation was going. The Three Sisters loved to play coy with their auguries. They liked to make their passengers beg and plead to find out what they knew about the future. But, really, the old grey dingbats were dying to share.

In the past, every time I’d agreed to listen to their so-called prophetic poetry, it turned out to be a prediction of what I would have for lunch, or an expert opinion about which Olympian god I most resembled. (Hint: It was never Apollo.) Then they would pester me for a critique and ask if I would share their poetry with my literary agent. Ugh.

I wasn’t sure what titbits they might have for me this time, but I was not going to give them the satisfaction of asking. I already had enough *actual* prophetic verse to worry about.

‘Doggerel,’ I explained for Meg’s sake, ‘means a few irregular lines of poetry. With these three, that’s redundant, since everything they do is irregular.’

‘We won’t tell you, then!’ Wasp threatened.

‘We will never tell!’ Anger agreed.

‘I didn’t ask,’ I said blandly.

‘I want to hear about the dog,’ Meg said.

‘No, you don’t,’ I assured her.

Outside, Queens blurred into the Long Island suburbs. In the front seat, the Grey Sisters practically quivered with eagerness to spill what they knew.

‘Very important words!’ Wasp said. ‘But you’ll never hear them!’

‘Okay,’ I agreed.

‘You can’t make us!’ Tempest said. ‘Even though your fate depends on it!’

A hint of doubt crept into my cranium. Was it possible –? No, surely not. If I fell for their tricks, I’d most likely get

the Grey Sisters' hot take on which facial products were perfect for my skin undertones.

'Not buying it,' I said.

'Not selling!' Wasp shrieked. 'Too important, these lines! We would only tell you if you threatened us with terrible things!'

'I will not resort to threatening you –'

'He's threatening us!' Tempest flailed. She slammed Wasp on the back so hard the communal eyeball popped right out of her socket. Wasp snatched it – and with a terrible show of fumbling, intentionally chucked it over her shoulder, right into my lap.

I screamed.

The sisters screamed, too. Anger, now bereft of guidance, swerved all over the road, sending my stomach into my oesophagus.

'He's stolen our eye!' cried Tempest. 'We can't see!'

'I have not!' I yelped. 'It's disgusting!'

Meg whooped with pleasure. 'THIS. IS. SO. COOL!'

'Get it off!' I squirmed and tilted my hips, hoping the eye would roll away, but it stayed stubbornly in my lap, staring up at me with the accusatory glare of a dead catfish. Meg did not help. Clearly, she didn't want to do anything that might interfere with the coolness of us dying in a faster-than-light car crash.

'He will crush our eye,' Anger cried, 'if we don't recite our verses!'

'I will not!'

'We will all die!' Wasp said. 'He is crazy!'

'I AM NOT!'

'Fine, you win!' Tempest howled. She drew herself up and recited as if performing for the people in Connecticut ten miles away: '*A dare reveals the path that was unknown!* '

Anger chimed in: '*And bears destruction; lion, snake-entwined!* '

Wasp concluded: '*Or else the princeps never be o'erthrown!*'

Meg clapped.

I stared at the Grey Sisters in disbelief. 'That wasn't doggerel. That was terza rima! You just gave us the next stanza of our actual prophecy!'

'Well, that's all we've got for you!' Anger said. 'Now give me the eye, quick. We're almost at camp!'

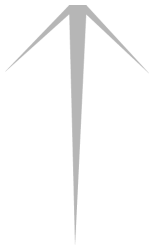
Panic overcame my shock. If Anger couldn't stop at our destination, we'd accelerate past the point of no return and vaporize in a colourful streak of plasma across Long Island.

And yet that *still* sounded better than touching the eyeball in my lap. 'Meg! Kleenex?'

She snorted. 'Wimp.' She scooped up the eye with her bare hand and tossed it to Anger.

Anger shoved the eye in her socket. She blinked at the road, yelled 'YIKES!' and slammed on the brakes so hard my chin hit my sternum.

Once the smoke cleared, I saw we had skidded to a stop on the old farm road just outside of camp. To our left loomed Half-Blood Hill, a single great pine tree rising from its summit, the Golden Fleece glittering from the lowest branch. Coiled around the base of the tree was Peleus the dragon. And standing next to the dragon, casually scratching its ears, was an old frenemy of mine: Dionysus, the god of doing things to annoy Apollo.



8

I am Mr A.
I am here to fix toilets
And also pass out.

PERHAPS THAT LAST COMMENT WAS UNFAIR.

Dionysus was the god of other things, such as wine, madness, Oscar-night after-parties and certain types of vegetation. But, to me, he would always be the annoying little brother who followed me around, trying to get my attention by imitating everything I did.

You know the type. You're a god. Your little brother pesters Dad to make *him* a god, too, even though being a god is supposed to be *your* thing. You have a nice chariot pulled by fiery horses. Your little brother insists on getting his own chariot pulled by leopards. You lay waste to the Greek armies at Troy. Your little brother decides to invade India. Pretty typical stuff.

Dionysus stood at the top of the hill, as if he'd been expecting us. Being a god, maybe he had. His leopard-skin golf shirt matched the Golden Fleece in the branch above him quite well. His mauve golf slacks did not. In the old days, I might have teased him about his taste in clothes. Now, I couldn't risk it.

A lump formed in my throat. I was already carsick from our taxi ride and our impromptu game of catch-the-eyeball. My wounded forehead throbbed. My brain swirled with the new lines of prophecy the Grey Sisters had given us. I didn't need any more things to worry about. But seeing Dionysus again … This would be complicated.

Meg slammed the taxi door behind her. 'Thanks, guys!' she told the Grey Sisters. 'Next time, tell me about the dog!'

Without so much as a goodbye or a plea to share their poetry with my literary agent, the Grey Sisters submerged in a pool of red-black tar.

Meg squinted up at the hill's summit. 'Who's that guy? We didn't meet him before.' She sounded suspicious, as if he were intruding on her territory.

'That,' I said, 'is the god Dionysus.'

Meg frowned. 'Why?'

She might have meant *Why is he a god? Why is he standing up there?* or *Why is this our life?* All three questions were equally valid.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Let's find out.'

Trekking up the hill, I fought the urge to burst into hysterical sobbing or laughter. Probably I was going into shock. It had been a rough day, and it wasn't even lunchtime yet. However, given the fact that we were approaching the god of madness, I had to consider the more serious possibility that I was having a psychotic or manic break.

I already felt disconnected from reality. I couldn't concentrate. I didn't know who I was, who I was supposed to be or even who I wanted to be. I was getting emotional whiplash from my exhilarating surges of godlike power, my depressing crashes back into mortal frailty and my adrenalin-charged bouts of terror. In such a condition, approaching Dionysus was asking for trouble. Just being near him could widen the cracks in anyone's psyche.

Meg and I reached the summit. Peleus welcomed us with a puff of steam from his nostrils. Meg gave the dragon a hug around the neck, which I'm not sure I would have recommended. Dragons are notoriously *not* huggers.

Dionysus eyed me with a mixture of shock and horror, much the same way I looked at myself in the mirror these days.

'So, it's true, what Father did to you,' he said. 'That cold-hearted *glámon* .'

In Ancient Greek, *glámon* meant something like *dirty old man* . Given Zeus's romantic track record, I doubted he would even consider it an insult.

Dionysus gripped my shoulders.

I didn't trust myself to speak.

He looked the same as he had for the past half century: a short middle-aged man with a potbelly, sagging jowls, a red nose and curly black hair. The violet tint of his irises was the only indicator that he might be more than human.

Other Olympians could never comprehend why Dionysus chose this form when he could look like anything he wanted. In ancient times, he'd been famous for his youthful beauty that defied gender.

But I understood. For the crime of chasing the wrong nymph (translation: one our father wanted instead), Dionysus had been sentenced to run this camp for a hundred years. He had been denied wine, his most noble creation, and forbidden access to Olympus except for special meeting days.

In retaliation, Dionysus had decided to look and act as ungodly as possible. He was like a child refusing to tuck in his shirt, comb his hair or brush his teeth, just to show his parents how little he cared.

'Poor, poor Apollo.' He hugged me. His hair smelled faintly of grape-flavoured bubblegum.

This unexpected show of sympathy brought me close to tears … until Dionysus pulled away, held me at arm's length

and gave me a triumphant smirk.

'*Now* you understand how miserable I've been,' he said. 'Finally, someone got punished even more harshly than me!'

I nodded, swallowing back a sob. Here was the old, on-brand Dionysus I knew and didn't exactly love. 'Yes. Hello, Brother. This is Meg –'

'Don't care.' Dionysus's eyes remained fixed on me, his tone infused with joy.

'Hmph.' Meg crossed her arms. 'Where's Chiron? I liked him better.'

'Who?' Dionysus said. 'Oh, him. Long story. Let's get you into camp, Apollo. I can't wait to show you off to the demigods. You look *horrible* !'

We took the long way through camp. Dionysus seemed determined to make sure everyone saw me.

'This is Mr A,' he told all the newcomers we encountered. 'He's my assistant. If you have any complaints or problems – toilets backing up or whatnot – talk to him.'

'Could you not?' I muttered.

Dionysus smiled. 'If I am Mr D, you can be Mr A.'

'He's Lester,' Meg complained. 'And he's *my* assistant.'

Dionysus ignored her. 'Oh, look, another batch of first-year campers! Let's go introduce you.'

My legs were wobbly. My head ached. I needed lunch, rest, antibiotics and a new identity, not necessarily in that order. But we trudged on.

The camp was busier than it had been the winter when Meg and I first straggled in. Then, only a core group of year-rounders had been present. Now, waves of newly discovered demigods were arriving for the summer – dozens of dazed kids from all over the world, many still accompanied by the satyrs who had located them. Some demigods, who, evidently, had recently fought off monsters,

were injured even worse than I was, which I suppose is why Meg and I didn't get more stares.

We made our way through the camp's central green. Around its edges, most of the twenty cabins buzzed with activity. Senior counsellors stood in the doorways, welcoming new members or providing directions. At the Hermes cabin, Julia Feingold looked especially overwhelmed, trying to find temporary spots for all the campers still unclaimed by their godly parents. At the Ares cabin, Sherman Yang barked at anyone who got too close to the building, warning them to look out for the land mines around the perimeter. Whether or not that was a joke, no one seemed anxious to find out. Young Harley from the Hephaestus cabin dashed around with a huge grin on his face, challenging the newbies to arm-wrestling contests.

Across the green, I spotted two of my own children – Austin and Kayla – but, as much as I wanted to talk with them, they were embroiled in some sort of conflict resolution between a group of security harpies and a new kid who had apparently done something the harpies didn't like. I caught Austin's words: 'No, you can't just eat a new camper. They get two warnings first!'

Even Dionysus didn't want to get involved in that conversation. We kept walking.

The damage from our wintertime battle against Nero's Colossus had been mostly repaired, though some of the dining hall's columns were still broken. Nestled between two hills was a new pond in the shape of a giant's footprint. We passed the volleyball court, the sword-fighting arena and the strawberry fields until finally Dionysus took pity on me and led us to camp headquarters.

Compared to the camp's Greek temples and amphitheatres, the four-storey sky-blue Victorian known as the Big House looked quaint and homey. Its white trim gleamed like cake frosting. Its bronze eagle weathervane drifted lazily in the breeze. On its wraparound front porch,

enjoying lemonade at the card table, sat Nico di Angelo and Will Solace.

'Dad!' Will shot to his feet. He ran down the steps and tackled me in a hug.

That's when I lost it. I wept openly.

My beautiful son, with his kind eyes, his healer's hands, his sun-warm demeanour. Somehow, he had inherited all my best qualities and none of the worst. He guided me up the steps and insisted I take his seat. He pressed a cold glass of lemonade into my hands, then started fussing over my wounded head.

'I'm fine,' I murmured, though clearly I wasn't.

His boyfriend, Nico di Angelo, hovered at the edge of our reunion – observing, keeping to the shadows, as children of Hades tend to do. His dark hair had grown longer. He was barefoot, in tattered jeans and a black version of the camp's standard T-shirt, with a skeletal pegasus on the front above the words CABI N 13 .

'Meg,' Nico said, 'take my chair. Your leg looks bad.' He scowled at Dionysus, as if the god should have arranged a golf cart for us.

'Yes, fine, sit.' Dionysus gestured listlessly at the card table. 'I was attempting to teach Will and Nico the rules of pinochle, but they're hopeless.'

'Ooh, pinochle,' Meg said. 'I like pinochle!'

Dionysus narrowed his eyes as if Meg were a small dog who had suddenly begun to spout Emily Dickinson. 'Is that so? Wonders never cease.'

Nico met my gaze, his eyes pools of ink. 'So, is it true? Is Jason …?'

'Nico,' Will chided. 'Don't pressure him.'

The ice cubes shook in my glass. I couldn't make myself speak, but my expression must have told Nico everything he needed to know. Meg offered Nico her hand. He took it in both of his.

He didn’t look angry, exactly. He looked as if he’d been hit in the gut not just once but so many times over the course of so many years that he was beginning to lose perspective on what it meant to be in pain. He swayed on his feet. He blinked. Then he flinched, jerking his hands away from Meg’s as if he’d just remembered his own touch was poison.

‘I …’ he faltered. ‘*Scusatemi* .’

He hurried down the steps and across the lawn, his bare feet leaving a trail of dead grass.

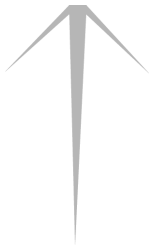
Will shook his head. ‘He only slips into Italian when he’s *really* upset.’

‘The boy has had too much bad news already,’ Dionysus said with a tone of grudging sympathy.

I wanted to ask what he meant about bad news. I wanted to apologize for bringing more trouble. I wanted to explain all the tremendous and spectacular ways I had failed since the last time I had seen Camp Half-Blood.

Instead, the lemonade glass slipped from my fingers. It shattered on the floor. I tipped sideways in my chair as Will’s voice receded down a long dark tunnel. ‘Dad! Guys, help me!’

Then I spiralled into unconsciousness.



9

Breakfast is the meal
With pancakes and burnt yogurt
And insanity.

BAD DREAMS?

Sure, why not!

I suffered a series of Instagram-boomerang nightmares – the same short scenes looped over and over: Luguselwa hurtling over a rooftop. The amphisbaena staring at me in bewilderment as two crossbow bolts pinned his necks to the wall. The Grey Sisters' eyeball flying into my lap and sticking there like it was coated in glue.

I tried to channel my dreams in a more peaceful direction – my favourite beach in Fiji, my old festival day in Athens, the gig I played with Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club in 1930. Nothing worked.

Instead, I found myself in Nero's throne room.

The loft space took up one whole floor of his tower. In every direction, glass walls looked out over the spires of Manhattan. In the centre of the room, on a marble dais, the emperor sprawled across a gaudy velvet couch throne. His purple satin pyjamas and tiger-striped bathrobe would've made Dionysus jealous. His crown of golden laurels sat

askew on his head, which made me want to adjust the neck beard that wrapped around his chin like a strap.

To his left stood a line of young people; demigods, I assumed – adopted members of the imperial family like Meg had been. I counted eleven in all, arranged from tallest to shortest, their ages ranging from about eighteen to eight. They wore purple-trimmed togas over their motley assortment of street clothes, to indicate their royal status. Their expressions were a case study in the results of Nero's abusive parenting style. The youngest seemed struck with wonder, fear and hero worship. The slightly older ones looked broken and traumatized, their eyes hollow. The adolescents showed a range of anger, resentment and self-loathing, all bottled up and carefully *not* directed at Nero. The oldest teens looked like mini-Neros: cynical, hard, cruel junior sociopaths.

I could not imagine Meg McCaffrey in that assembly. And yet I couldn't stop wondering where she would fall in the line of horrific expressions.

Two Germani lumbered into the throne room carrying a stretcher. On it lay the large, battered form of Luguselwa. They set her down at Nero's feet, and she let out a miserable groan. At least she was still alive.

'The hunter returns empty-handed,' Nero sneered. 'Plan B it is, then. A forty-eight-hour ultimatum seems reasonable.' He turned to his adopted children. 'Lucius, double security at the storage vats. Aemillia, send out invitations. And order a cake. Something nice. It's not every day we get to destroy a city the size of New York.'

My dream-self plummeted through the tower into the depths of the earth.

I stood in a vast cavern. I knew I must be somewhere beneath Delphi, the seat of my most sacred Oracle, because the soup of volcanic fumes swirling around me smelled like nothing else in the world. I could hear my archnemesis,

Python, somewhere in the darkness, dragging his immense body over the stone floor.

'You still do not see it.' His voice was a low rumble. 'Oh, Apollo, bless your tiny, inadequate brain. You charge around, knocking over pieces, but you never look at the whole board. A few hours, at most. That is all it will take once the last pawn falls. And you will do the hard work for me!'

His laughter was like an explosion sunk deep into stone, designed to bring down a hillside. Fear rolled over me until I could no longer breathe.

I woke feeling like I'd spent hours trying to squirm out of a stone cocoon. Every muscle in my body ached.

I wished I could just *once* wake up refreshed after a dream about getting seaweed wraps and pedicures with the Nine Muses. Oh, I missed our spa decades! But no. I got sneering emperors and giant laughing reptiles instead.

I sat up, woozy and blurry-eyed. I was lying in my old cot in the Me cabin. Sunlight streamed through the windows – *morning* light? Had I really slept that long? Snuggled up next to me, something warm and furry was growling and snuffling on my pillow. At first glance, I thought it might be a pit bull, though I was fairly sure I did not own a pit bull. Then it looked up, and I realized it was the disembodied head of a leopard.

One nanosecond later, I was standing at the opposite end of the cabin, screaming. It was the closest I'd come to teleporting since I'd lost my godly powers.

'Oh, you're awake!' My son Will emerged from the bathroom in a billow of steam, his blond hair dripping wet and a towel around his waist. On his left pectoral was a stylized sun tattoo, which seemed unnecessary to me – as if he could be mistaken for anything but a child of the sun god.

He froze when he registered the panic in my eyes. ‘What’s wrong?’

GRR! said the leopard.

‘Seymour?’ Will marched over to my cot and picked up the leopard head – which at some point in the distant past had been taxidermied and stuck on a plaque, then liberated from a garage sale by Dionysus and granted new life. Normally, as I recalled, Seymour resided over the fireplace mantel in the Big House, which did not explain why he had been chewing on my pillow.

‘What are you doing here?’ Will demanded of the leopard. Then, to me: ‘I swear I did *not* put him in your bed.’

‘I did.’ Dionysus materialized right next to me.

My tortured lungs could not manage another scream, but I leaped back an additional few inches.

Dionysus gave me his patented smirk. ‘I thought you might like some company. I always sleep better with a teddy leopard.’

‘Very kind.’ I tried my best to kill him with eye daggers. ‘But I prefer to sleep alone.’

‘As you wish. Seymour, back to the Big House.’ Dionysus snapped his fingers and the leopard head vanished from Will’s hands.

‘Well, then …’ Dionysus studied me. ‘Feeling better after nineteen hours of sleep?’

I realized I was wearing nothing but my underwear. With my pale, lumpy mortal form covered in bruises and scars, I looked less than ever like a god and more like a grub that had been prised from the soil with a stick.

‘Feeling great,’ I grumbled.

‘Excellent! Will, get him presentable. I’ll see you both at breakfast.’

‘Breakfast …?’ I said in a daze.

‘Yes,’ Dionysus said. ‘It’s the meal with pancakes. I do love pancakes.’

He disappeared in a grape-scented cloud of glitter.

‘Such a show-off,’ I muttered.

Will laughed. ‘You really have changed.’

‘I wish people would stop pointing that out.’

‘It’s a good thing.’

I looked down again at my battered body. ‘If you say so. Do you have any clothing, or possibly a burlap sack I might borrow?’

Here’s all you need to know about Will Solace: he had clothes waiting for me. On his last trip into town, he’d gone shopping specifically for things that might fit me.

‘I figured you’d come back to camp eventually,’ he said. ‘I hoped you would, anyway. I wanted you to feel at home.’

It was enough to start me crying again. Gods, I was an emotional wreck. Will hadn’t inherited his thoughtfulness from me. That was all his mother, Naomi, bless her kind heart.

I thought about giving Will a hug, but since we were clad in just underwear and a towel, respectively, that seemed awkward. He patted me on the shoulder instead.

‘Go take a shower,’ he advised. ‘The others took an early-morning hike –’ he gestured at the empty bunks – ‘but they’ll be back soon. I’ll wait for you.’

Once I was showered and dressed – in a fresh pair of jeans and a V-necked olive tee, both of which fit perfectly – Will re-bandaged my forehead. He gave me some aspirin for my aching everything. I was starting to feel almost human again – in a good way – when a conch horn sounded in the distance, calling the camp to breakfast.

On our way out of the cabin, we collided with Kayla and Austin, just returning from their hike with three younger campers in tow. More tears and hugs were exchanged.

‘You’ve grown up!’ Kayla gripped my shoulders with her archery-strong hands. The June sunlight made her freckles more pronounced. The green-tinted tips of her orange hair made me think of Halloween-pumpkin candy. ‘You’re two inches taller at least! Isn’t he, Austin?’

‘Definitely,’ Austin agreed.

As a jazz musician, Austin was usually smooth and cool, but he gave me a serene smile like I’d just nailed a solo worthy of Ornette Coleman. His sleeveless orange camp tee showed off his dark arms. His cornrows were done in swirls like alien crop circles.

‘It’s not just the height,’ he decided. ‘It’s the way you hold yourself …’

‘Ahem,’ said one of the kids behind him.

‘Oh, right. Sorry, guys!’ Austin stepped aside. ‘We got three new campers this year, Dad. I’m sure you remember your children Gracie and Jerry and Yan … Guys, this is Apollo!’

Austin introduced them casually, like *I know you don’t have a clue who these three kids are that you sired and forgot about twelve or thirteen years ago, but don’t worry, Dad, I got you.*

Jerry was from London, Gracie from Idaho and Yan from Hong Kong. (When had I been in Hong Kong?) All three seemed stunned to meet me – but more in a *you-have-to-be-kidding-me* way, not in a *wow-cool* sort of way. I muttered some apologies about being a terrible father. The newcomers exchanged glances and apparently decided, by silent agreement, to put me out of my misery.

‘I’m famished,’ Jerry said.

‘Yeah,’ Gracie said. ‘Dining hall!’

And off we trekked like one big super-awkward family.

Campers from other cabins were also streaming towards the dining pavilion. I spotted Meg halfway up the hill, chatting excitedly with her siblings from the Demeter cabin. At her side trotted Peaches, her fruit-tree spirit companion. The little diapered fellow seemed quite happy, alternately flapping his leafy wings and grabbing Meg’s leg to get her attention. We hadn’t seen Peaches since Kentucky, as he tended to only show up in natural settings,

or when Meg was in dire trouble, or when breakfast was about to be served.

Meg and I had been together so long, usually just the two of us, that I felt a pang in my heart watching her stroll along with a different set of friends. She looked so content without me. If I ever made it back to Mount Olympus, I wondered if she would decide to stay at Camp Half-Blood. I also wondered why the thought made me so sad.

After the horrors she'd suffered in Nero's Imperial Household, she deserved some peace.

That made me think about my dream of Luguselwa, battered and broken on a stretcher in front of Nero's throne. Perhaps I had more in common with the Gaul than I wanted to admit. Meg needed a better family, a better home than either Lu *or* I could give her. But that didn't make it any easier to contemplate letting her go.

Just ahead of us, a boy of about nine stumbled from the Ares cabin. His helmet had completely swallowed his head. He ran to catch up to his cabinmates, the point of his too-long sword tracing a serpentine line in the dirt behind him.

'The newbies all look so young,' Will murmured. 'Were we ever that young?'

Kayla and Austin nodded in agreement.

Yan grumbled. 'We newbies are right *here* .'

I wanted to tell them that they were *all* so young. Their lifespans were a blink of an eye compared to my four millennia. I should be wrapping them all in warm blankets and giving them cookies rather than expecting them to be heroes, slay monsters and buy me clothes.

On the other hand, Achilles hadn't even started shaving yet when he sailed off to the Trojan War. I'd watched so many young heroes march bravely to their deaths over the centuries … Just thinking about it made me feel older than Kronos's teething ring.

After the relatively ordered meals of the Twelfth Legion at Camp Jupiter, breakfast at the dining pavilion was quite

a shock. Counsellors tried to explain the seating rules (such as they were) while returning campers jockeyed for spots next to their friends, and the newbies tried not to kill themselves or each other with their new weapons. Dryads wove through the crowd with platters of food, satyrs trotting behind them and stealing bites. Honeysuckle vines bloomed on the Greek columns, filling the air with perfume.

At the sacrificial fire, demigods took turns scraping parts of their meals into the flames as offerings to the gods – corn flakes, bacon, toast, yogurt. (Yogurt?) A steady plume of smoke rolled into the heavens. As a former god, I appreciated the sentiment, but I also wondered whether the smell of burning yogurt was worth the air pollution.

Will offered me a seat next to him, then passed me a goblet of orange juice.

'Thank you,' I managed. 'But where's, uh …?'

I scanned the crowd for Nico di Angelo, remembering how he normally sat at Will's table, regardless of cabin rules.

'Up there,' Will said, apparently guessing my thoughts.

The son of Hades sat next to Dionysus at the head table. The god's plate was piled high with pancakes. Nico's was empty. They seemed an odd pair, sitting together, but they appeared to be in a deep and serious conversation. Dionysus rarely tolerated demigods at his table. If he was giving Nico such undivided attention, something must be seriously wrong.

I remembered what Mr D had said yesterday, just before I passed out. '"That boy has had too much bad news already",' I repeated, then frowned at Will. 'What did that mean?'

Will picked at the wrapper of his bran muffin. 'It's complicated. Nico sensed Jason's death weeks ago. It sent him into a rage.'

'I'm so sorry …'

‘It’s not your fault,’ Will assured me. ‘When you got here, you just confirmed what Nico already knew. The thing is … Nico lost his sister Bianca a few years back. He spent a long time raging about that. He wanted to go into the Underworld to retrieve her, which … I guess, as a son of Hades, he’s really *not* supposed to do. Anyway, he was finally starting to come to terms with her death. Then he learned about Jason, the first person he really considered a friend. It triggered a lot of stuff for him. Nico has travelled to the deepest parts of the Underworld, even down in Tartarus. The fact that he came through it in one piece is a miracle.’

‘With his sanity intact,’ I agreed. Then I looked again at Dionysus, god of madness, who seemed to be giving Nico advice. ‘Oh …’

‘Yeah,’ Will agreed, his face drawn with worry. ‘They’ve been eating most meals together, though Nico doesn’t eat much these days. Nico has been having … I guess you’d call it post-traumatic stress disorder. He gets flashbacks. He has waking dreams. Dionysus is trying to help him make sense of it all. The worst part is the voices.’

A dryad slammed a plate of huevos rancheros in front of me, almost making me jump out of my jeans. She smirked and walked off, looking quite pleased with herself.

‘Voices?’ I asked Will.

Will turned up his palms. ‘Nico won’t tell me much. Just … someone in Tartarus keeps calling his name. Someone needs his help. It’s been all I could do to stop him from storming down into the Underworld by himself. I told him: talk to Dionysus first. Figure out what’s real and what’s not. Then, if he has to go … we’ll go together.’

A rivulet of cold sweat trickled between my shoulder blades. I couldn’t imagine Will in the Underworld – a place with no sunshine, no healing, no kindness.

‘I hope it doesn’t come to that,’ I said.

Will nodded. ‘Maybe if we can take down Nero – maybe that will give Nico something else to focus on for a while, assuming we can help you.’

Kayla had been listening quietly, but now she leaned in. ‘Yeah, Meg was telling us about this prophecy you got. The Tower of Nero and all that. If there’s a battle, we want in.’

Austin wagged a breakfast sausage at me. ‘Word.’

Their willingness to help made me feel grateful. If I had to go to war, I would want Kayla’s bow at my side. Will’s healing skill might keep me alive, despite my best efforts to get killed. Austin could terrify our enemies with diminished minor riffs on his saxophone.

On the other hand, I remembered Luguselwa’s warning about Nero’s readiness. He *wanted* us to attack. A full frontal assault would be suicide. I would not let my children come to harm, even if my only other option was to trust Lu’s crazy plan and surrender myself to the emperor.

A forty-eight-hour ultimatum, Nero had said in my dream. Then he would burn down New York.

Gods, why wasn’t there an option C on this multiple-choice test?

Clink, clink, clink.

Dionysus rose at the head table, a glass and spoon in his hands. The dining pavilion fell silent. Demigods turned and waited for morning announcements. I recalled Chiron having much more trouble getting everyone’s attention. Then again, Chiron didn’t have the power to turn the entire assembly into bunches of grapes.

‘Mr A and Will Solace, report to the head table,’ Dionysus said.

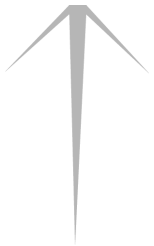
The campers waited for more.

‘That’s all,’ Mr D said. ‘Honestly, do I need to tell you how to eat breakfast? Carry on!’

The campers resumed their normal happy chaos. Will and I picked up our plates.

‘Good luck,’ Kayla said. ‘I have a feeling you’ll need it.’

We went to join Dionysus and Nico at the International Head-table of Pancakes.



10

Huevos rancheros
Do not go with prophecies,
Much like happiness.

DIONYSUS HAD NOT ASKED FOR MEG, BUT she joined us anyway.

She plopped down next to me with her plate of pancakes and snapped her fingers at Dionysus. ‘Pass the syrup.’

I feared Mr D might turn her into a taxidermied back end for Seymour, but he simply did as she asked. I suppose he didn’t want to polymorph the only other person at camp who liked pinochle.

Peaches stayed behind at the Demeter table, where he was getting fawned over by the campers. This was just as well, since grape gods and peach spirits don’t mix.

Will sat next to Nico and put an apple on his empty plate. ‘Eat something.’

‘Hmph,’ Nico said, though he leaned into Will ever so slightly.

‘Right.’ Dionysus held up a cream-coloured piece of stationery between his fingers, like a magician producing a card. ‘This came for me last night via harpy courier.’

He slid it across the table so I could read the fancy print.

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
Requests the pleasure of your company
At the burning of
The Greater New York Metropolitan Area
Forty-eight hours after receipt of this Invitation
UNLESS
The former god Apollo, now known as
Lester Papadopoulos,
Surrenders himself before that time to imperial justice
At the Tower of Nero
IN WHICH CASE
We will just have cake

GIFTS:
Only expensive ones, please

R.S.V.P.
Don't bother. If you don't show up, we'll know.

I pushed away my huevos rancheros. My appetite had vanished. It was one thing to hear about Nero's diabolical plans in my nightmares. It was another thing to see them spelled out in black-and-white calligraphy with a promise of cake.

'Forty-eight hours from last night,' I said.

'Yes,' Dionysus mused. 'I've always liked Nero. He has panache.'

Meg stabbed viciously at her pancakes. She filled her mouth with fluffy, syrupy goodness, probably to keep herself from muttering curse words.

Nico caught my gaze across the table. His dark eyes swam with anger and worry. On his plate, the apple started to wither.

Will squeezed his hand. 'Hey, stop.'

Nico's expression softened a bit. The apple stopped its premature slide into old age. 'Sorry. I just – I'm tired of talking about problems I can't fix. I want to help.'

He said *help* as if it meant *chop our enemies into small pieces.*

Nico di Angelo wasn't physically imposing like Sherman Yang. He didn't have Reyna Ramírez-Arellano's air of authority, or Hazel Levesque's commanding presence when she charged into battle on horseback. But Nico wasn't someone I would *ever* want as an enemy.

He was deceptively quiet. He appeared anaemic and frail. He kept himself on the periphery. But Will was right about how much Nico had been through. He had been born in Mussolini's Italy. He had survived decades in the time-warp reality of the Lotus Casino. He'd emerged in modern times disoriented and culture-shocked, arrived at Camp Half-Blood, and promptly lost his sister Bianca to a dangerous quest. He had wandered the Labyrinth in self-imposed exile, being tortured and brainwashed by a malevolent ghost. He'd overcome everyone's distrust and emerged from the Battle of Manhattan as a hero. He'd been captured by giants during the rise of Gaia. He'd wandered Tartarus alone and somehow managed to come out alive. And, through it all, he'd struggled with his upbringing as a conservative Catholic Italian male from the 1930s and finally learned to accept himself as a young gay man.

Anyone who could survive all that had more resilience than Stygian iron.

'We do need your help,' I promised. 'Meg told you about the prophetic verses?'

'Meg told Will,' Nico said. 'Will told me. Terza rima. Like in Dante. We had to study him in elementary school in Italy. Gotta say, I never thought it would come in handy.'

Will poked at his bran muffin. 'Just so I'm clear … You got the first stanza from a Cyclops's armpit, the second from a

two-headed snake and the third from three old ladies who drive a taxi?'

'We didn't have much choice in the matter,' I said. 'But yes.'

'Does the poem ever end?' Will asked. 'If the rhyme scheme interlocks stanza to stanza, couldn't it keep going forever?'

I shuddered. 'I hope not. Usually the last stanza would include a closing couplet, but we haven't heard one yet.'

'Which means,' Nico said, 'that there are more stanzas to come.'

'Yippee.' Meg shoved more pancake in her mouth.

Dionysus matched her with a mouthful of his own, as if they were engaged in a competition to see who could devour the most and enjoy it the least.

'Well, then,' Will said with forced cheerfulness, 'let's discuss the stanzas we have. What was it – *The tow'r of Nero two alone ascend* ? That part is obvious enough. It must mean Apollo and Meg, right?'

'We surrender,' Meg said. 'That's Luguselwa's plan.'

Dionysus snorted. 'Apollo, please tell me you're not going to trust a Gaul. You haven't got *that* addle-brained, have you?'

'Hey!' Meg said. 'We can trust Lu. She let Lester throw her off a roof.'

Dionysus narrowed his eyes. 'Did she survive?'

Meg looked flustered. 'I mean –'

'Yes,' I interrupted. 'She did.'

I told them what I had seen in my dreams: the broken Gaul brought before Nero's throne, the emperor's ultimatum, then my plunge into the caverns beneath Delphi, where Python blessed my tiny brain.

Dionysus nodded thoughtfully. 'Ah, yes, Python. If you survive Nero, you have *that* to look forward to.'

I didn't appreciate the reminder. Stopping a power-mad emperor from taking over the world and destroying a city

… that was one thing. Python was a more nebulous threat, harder to quantify, but potentially a thousand times more dangerous.

Meg and I had freed four Oracles from the grasp of the Triumvirate, but Delphi still remained firmly under Python's control. That meant the world's main source of prophecy was being slowly choked off, poisoned, manipulated. In ancient times, Delphi had been called the *omphalos* , the navel of the world. Unless I managed to defeat Python and retake the Oracle, the entire fate of humanity was at risk. Delphic prophecies were not simply glimpses into the future. They *shaped* the future. And you did not want an enormous malevolent monster controlling a wellspring of power like that, calling the shots for all human civilization.

I frowned at Dionysus. 'You could always, oh, I don't know, decide to *help* .'

He scoffed. 'You know as well as I do, Apollo, that quests like this are demigod business. As for advising, guiding, helping … that's really more Chiron's job. He should be back from his meeting … oh, tomorrow night, I would think, but that will be too late for you.'

I wished he hadn't put it that way: *too late for you* .

'What meeting?' Meg asked.

Dionysus waved the question away. 'Some … joint task force, he called it? The world often has more than one crisis happening at a time. Perhaps you've noticed. He said he had an emergency meeting with a cat and a severed head, whatever that means.'

'So instead we get you,' Meg said.

'Believe me, child, I would rather not be here with you delightful rapscallions, either. After I was so helpful in the wars against Kronos and Gaia, I was hoping Zeus might grant me early parole from my servitude in this miserable place. But, as you can see, he sent me right back to

complete my hundred years. Our father does love to punish his children.'

He gave me that smirk again – the one that meant *at least you got it worse.*

I wished Chiron were here, but there was no point in dwelling on that, or on whatever the old centaur might be up to at his emergency meeting. We had enough to worry about on our own.

Python's words kept slithering around in my brain: *You never look at the whole board.*

The evil reptile was playing a game inside a game. No great surprise that he would be using the Triumvirate for his own purposes, but Python seemed to relish the idea that I might kill his last ally, Nero. And after that? *A few hours, at most. That is all it will take once the last pawn falls.*

I had no idea what that meant. Python was right that I couldn't see the whole board. I didn't understand the rules. I just wanted to sweep the pieces away and shout, *I'm going home!*

'Whatever.' Meg poured more syrup onto her plate in an effort to create Lake Pancake. 'Point is – that other line says our lives depend on Nero's own. That means we can trust Lu. We'll surrender before the deadline, like she told us.'

Nico tilted his head. 'Even if you do surrender, what makes you think Nero will honour his word? If he's gone to all the trouble to rig enough Greek fire to burn down New York, why wouldn't he just do it anyway?'

'He would,' I said. 'Most definitely.'

Dionysus seemed to ponder this. 'But these fires wouldn't extend as far as, say, Camp Half-Blood.'

'Dude,' Will said.

'What?' the god asked. 'I am only in charge of the safety of this camp.'

'Lu has a plan,' Meg insisted. 'Once we're captured, Nero will relax his guard. Lu will free us. We'll destroy …' She

hesitated. ‘We’ll destroy his fasces. Then he’ll be weak. We can beat him before he burns the city.’

I wondered if anyone else had caught her change of direction – the way she’d felt too uncomfortable to say *We’ll destroy Nero* .

At the other tables, campers continued eating breakfast, jostling each other good-naturedly, chatting about the day’s scheduled activities.

None of them paid much attention to our conversation. No one was glancing nervously at me and asking their cabinmates if I was really the god Apollo.

Why would they? This was a new generation of demigods, just starting their first summer at camp. For all they knew, I was a normal fixture of the landscape like Mr D, the satyrs and ritual yogurt-burnings. *Mr A? Oh, yeah. He used to be a god or something. Just ignore him.*

Many times over the centuries, I had felt out-of-date and forgotten. Never more so than at that moment.

‘If Lu is telling the truth,’ Will was saying, ‘and *if* Nero still trusts her –’

‘And *if* she can break you out,’ Nico added, ‘and *if* you can destroy the fasces before Nero burns down the city … That’s a lot of ifs. I don’t like scenarios with more than one *if* .’

‘Like I might take you out for pizza this weekend,’ Will offered, ‘*if* you’re not too annoying.’

‘Exactly.’ Nico’s smile was a bit of winter sun breaking between snow flurries. ‘So, assuming you guys go through with this crazy plan, what are we supposed to do?’

Meg belched. ‘It’s right there in the prophecy. The son-of-Hades thing.’

Nico’s face clouded over. ‘What *son-of-Hades* thing?’

Will developed a sudden interest in his bran muffin’s wrapper. Nico seemed to realize, at the same time I did, that Will hadn’t shared all the lines of the prophecy with him.

‘William Andrew Solace,’ Nico said, ‘do you have something to confess?’

‘I was going to mention it.’ Will looked at me pleadingly, as if he couldn’t make himself say the lines.

‘*The son of Hades, cavern-runners’ friend*,’ I recited. ‘*Must show the secret way unto the throne*.’

Nico scowled with such intensity I feared he might make Will wither like the apple. ‘You think that might have been good to mention sooner?’

‘Hold on,’ I said, partly to spare Will from Nico’s wrath, and partly because I had been racking my brain, trying to think who these ‘cavern-runners’ might be, and I still had no clue. ‘Nico, do you know what those lines mean?’

Nico nodded. ‘The cavern-runners are … new friends of mine.’

‘They’re hardly friends,’ Will muttered.

‘They’re experts on subterranean geography,’ Nico said. ‘I’ve been talking to them about … other business.’

‘Which is not good for your mental health,’ Dionysus added in a singsong voice.

Nico gave him a death-to-apples look. ‘If there *is* a secret way into Nero’s tower, they might know it.’

Will shook his head. ‘Every time you visit them …’ He let his statement die, but the concern in his voice was as jagged as broken glass.

‘Then come with me this time,’ Nico said. ‘*Help* me.’

Will’s expression was miserable. I could tell he desperately wanted to protect Nico, to help him any way he could. He also desperately did not want to visit these cavern-runners.

‘Who are they?’ Meg said, between bites of pancake. ‘Are they horrible?’

‘Yes,’ Will said.

‘No,’ Nico said.

‘Well, that’s settled, then,’ Dionysus said. ‘Since Mr di Angelo seems intent on ignoring my mental-health advice

and going on this quest –'

'That's not fair,' Nico protested. 'You heard the prophecy. I *have* to.'

'The whole concept of "have to" is strange to me,' Dionysus said, 'but if your mind is made up, you'd best get going, eh? Apollo only has until tomorrow night to surrender, or fake-surrender, or whatever you wish to call it.'

'Anxious to get rid of us?' Meg asked.

Dionysus laughed. 'And people say there are no stupid questions. But if you trust your friend Lululemon –'

'Luguselwa,' Meg growled.

'Whatever. Shouldn't you hurry back to her?'

Nico folded his arms. 'I'll need some time before we leave. If I want to ask my new friends a favour, I can't show up empty-handed.'

'Oh, ick,' Will said. 'You're not going to …'

Nico raised an eyebrow at him, like, *Really, boyfriend? You're already in the doghouse.*

Will sighed. 'Fine. I'll go with you to … gather supplies.'

Nico nodded. 'That'll take us most of the day. Apollo, Meg, how about you stay at camp and rest up for now? The four of us can leave for the city first thing tomorrow morning. That should still give us enough time.'

'But …' My voice faltered.

I wanted to protest, but I wasn't sure on what grounds. Only a day at Camp Half-Blood before our final push towards destruction and death? That wasn't nearly enough time to procrastinate! 'I, uh … I thought a quest had to be formally authorized.'

'I formally authorize it,' Dionysus said.

'But it can only be three people!' I said.

Dionysus looked at Will, Nico and me. 'I'm only counting three.'

'Hey!' Meg said. 'I'm coming, too!'

Dionysus pointedly ignored her.

‘We don’t even have a plan!’ I said. ‘Once we find this secret path, what do we do with it? Where do we start?’

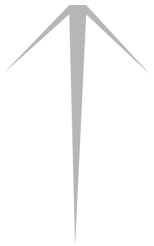
‘We start with Rachel,’ Will said, still picking glumly at his muffin. ‘*A* Dare *reveals the path that was unknown* .’

The truth pierced the base of my neck like an acupuncture needle.

Of course, Will’s interpretation made total sense. Our old friend would probably be at home in Brooklyn, just starting her summer break, not expecting me to crash her place and demand help.

‘Rachel Elizabeth Dare,’ I said. ‘My Delphic priestess.’

‘Excellent,’ Dionysus said. ‘Now that you’ve got your suicidal quest figured out, can we please finish breakfast? And stop hogging the syrup, McCaffrey. Other people have pancakes, too.’



11

I apologize
To my arrow, and undies,
And, well, everything.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU ONLY HAD one day at Camp Half-Blood?

Perhaps you'd partake in a game of capture the flag, or ride a pegasus over the beach, or laze in the meadow enjoying the sunshine and the sweet fragrance of ripening strawberries.

All good choices. I did none of them.

I spent my day running around in a panic, trying to prepare myself for imminent death.

After breakfast, Nico refused to share any more information about the mysterious cave-runners. 'You'll find out tomorrow' was all he said.

When I asked Will, he clammed up and looked so sad I didn't have the heart to press him.

Dionysus probably could have enlightened me, but he'd already checked us off his to-do list.

'I told you, Apollo, the world has many crises. Just this morning, scientists released another study tying soda to hypertension. If they continue to disparage the name of

Diet Coke, I will have to smite someone!' He stormed off to plot his revenge on the health industry.

I thought Meg, at least, would stay at my side as we got ready for our quest. Instead, she chose to spend her morning planting squash with the Demeter cabin. That's correct, dear reader. She chose ornamental gourds over me.

My first stop was the Ares cabin, where I asked Sherman Yang if he had any helpful intel on Nero's tower.

'It's a fortress,' he said. 'A frontal attack would be –'

'Suicide,' I guessed. 'No secret entrances?'

'Not that I know of. If there were, they'd be heavily guarded and set with traps.' He got a faraway look on his face. 'Maybe motion-activated flamethrowers. That would be cool.'

I began to wonder if Sherman would be more helpful as an advisor to Nero.

'Is it possible,' I asked, 'that Nero could have a doomsday weapon in place? For instance, enough Greek fire to destroy New York at the push of a button?'

'Whoa …' Sherman developed the lovestruck expression of someone seeing Aphrodite for the first time. 'That would be amazing. I mean *bad.* That would be bad. But … yeah, it's possible. With his wealth and resources? The amount of time he's had to plan? Sure. He'd need a central storage facility and a delivery system for rapid dispersal. My guess? It would be underground – to take advantage of the city's pipes, sewers, tunnels and whatnot. You think he's really got something like that? When do we leave for battle?'

I realized I may have told Sherman Yang too much. 'I'll get back to you,' I muttered, and beat a hasty retreat.

Next stop: the Athena cabin.

I asked their current head counsellor, Malcolm, if he had any information about the Tower of Nero or creatures called 'cave-runners,' or any hypotheses about why a Gaul

like Luguselwa might be working for Nero, and whether or not she could be trusted.

Malcolm paced the cabin, frowning at various wall maps and bookshelves. ‘I could do some research,’ he offered. ‘We could come up with a solid intelligence dossier and a plan of attack.’

‘That – that would be amazing!’

‘It’ll take us about four weeks. Maybe three, if we push it. When do you have to leave?’

I exited the cabin in tears.

Before lunchtime, I decided to consult my weapon of last resort: the Arrow of Dodona. I moved into the woods, thinking perhaps the arrow would be more prophetic if I brought it closer to its place of origin, the Grove of Dodona, where trees whispered the future and every branch dreamed of growing up to be a Shakespeare-spouting projectile. Also, I wanted to be far enough from the cabins that no one would see me talking to an inanimate object.

I updated the arrow on the latest developments and prophecy verses. Then, gods help me, I asked its advice.

I TOLDST THOU BEFORE, the arrow said. *I SEEST NO OTHER INTERPRETATION. THOU MUST TRUST THE EMPEROR’S OWN.*

‘Meaning Luguselwa,’ I said. ‘Meaning I should surrender myself to Nero, because a Gaul I barely know tells me it’s the only way to stop the emperor.’

VERILY, said the arrow.

‘And seest thou – Can you see what will happen after we surrender?’

NAY.

‘Maybe if I brought you back to the Grove of Dodona?’

NAY! It spoke so forcefully that it almost rattled out of my grasp.

I stared at the arrow, waiting for more, but I got the feeling its outburst had surprised even it.

‘So … are you just making horse sounds now?’

A FIG! it cursed. At least, I assumed it was a swear and not a lunch order. *TAKEST ME NOT TO THE GROVE, PERNICIOUS LESTER! THINKEST THOU I SHOULDST BE WELCOMED THERE, MY QUEST INCOMPLETE?*

Its tone wasn't easy to understand, since its voice resonated straight into the plates of my skull, but I thought it sounded … hurt.

'I – I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't realize –'

OF COURSE THOU DIDST NOT. Its fletching rippled. *I LEFT NOT WILLINGLY FROM MY HOME, O LESTER. I WAS FORCED, CAST OUT! ONE SMALL BRANCH, EXPENDABLE, FORGETTABLE, EXILED FROM THE CHORUS OF TREES UNTIL I SHOULDST PROVE MYSELF! IF NOW I RETURNED, THE ENTIRE GROVE WOULD LAUGH. THE HUMILIATION …*

It became still in my hand.

FORGETTEST THOU WHAT I SAID, it hummed. *PRETENDEST THOU IT NEVER HAPPENED.*

I wasn't sure what to say. All my years as a god of archery had not prepared me for playing therapist to an arrow. And yet … I felt terrible for the poor projectile. I had hauled it across the country and back again. I had complained about its shortcomings. I had belittled its advice and made fun of its lofty language. I had never stopped to consider that it had feelings, hopes, dreams and perhaps even a family as dysfunctional and unsupportive as mine.

I wondered, bitterly, if there was *anyone* I hadn't neglected, hurt or overlooked during my time as a mortal – strike that – during my four thousand years of existence, period. I could only be grateful that my shoes were not sentient. Or my underwear. Gods, I would never be able to stop apologizing.

'I have used you poorly,' I told the arrow. 'I'm sorry. Once we've succeeded in our quest, I'll return you to the Grove of Dodona, and you'll be welcomed back as a hero.'

I could feel the pulse in my fingertips beating against the arrow's shaft. It remained quiet for six heartbeats.

AYE, it said at last. *DOUBTLESS YOU ARE RIGHT.*

As far as red flags went, the Arrow of Dodona telling me I was right was the reddest and flaggiest I could imagine.

'What is it?' I demanded. 'You've seen something in the future? Something bad?'

Its point shuddered. *WORRY NOT, THOU. I MUST NEEDS RETURN TO MY QUIVER. THOU SHOULDST SPEAK TO MEG.*

The arrow fell silent. I wanted to know more. I knew there *was* more. But the arrow had signalled that it was done talking, and, for once, I thought I should consider what it wanted.

I returned it to the quiver and began my hike back to the cabins.

Perhaps I was overreacting. Just because my life was doom and gloom did not necessarily mean the arrow was doomed, too.

Maybe it was just being evasive because, at the end of my journeys, whether I died or not, it was planning to pitch my life story to one of the Muses' new streaming services. I would be remembered only as a limited series on Calliope+.

Yes, that was probably it. What a relief …

I was almost to the edge of the forest when I heard laughter – the laughter of *dryads* , I deduced, based on my centuries of experience as a dryad stalker. I followed the sound to a nearby outcropping of rocks, where Meg McCaffrey and Peaches were hanging out with half a dozen tree spirits.

The dryads were fawning over the fruit spirit, who, being no fool, was doing his best to look adorable for the ladies – which meant not baring his fangs, growling or showing his claws. He was also wearing a clean loincloth, which was more than he'd ever done around me.

‘Oh, he’s precious!’ said one of the dryads, ruffling Peaches’ leafy green hair.

‘These little toes!’ said another, giving him a foot massage.

The *karpos* purred and fluttered his branchy wings. The dryads did not seem to mind that he looked like a killer baby grown from a chia kit.

Meg tickled his belly. ‘Yeah, he’s pretty awesome. I found him –’

That’s when the dryads saw me.

‘Gotta go,’ said one, disappearing in a whirl of leaves.

‘Yeah, I have this … thing,’ said another, and poofed into pollen.

The other dryads followed suit, until it was only Meg, Peaches, me and the lingering scent of Dryadique™ biodegradable shampoo.

Peaches growled at me. ‘Peaches.’

Which no doubt meant *Dude, you scared off my groupies.*

‘Sorry. I was just …’ I waved my hand. ‘Passing by? Wandering around, waiting to die? I’m not sure.’

‘S’okay,’ Meg said. ‘Pull up a rock.’

Peaches snarled, perhaps doubting my willingness to massage his feet.

Meg pacified him by scratching behind his ear, which reduced him to a purring puddle of bliss.

It felt good to sit, even on a jagged chunk of quartz. The sunshine was pleasant without being too warm. (Yes, I used to be a sun god. Now I am a temperature wimp.)

Meg was dressed in her Sally Jackson Valentine’s Day outfit. The pink dress had been washed since our arrival, thank goodness, but the knees of her white leggings were newly stained from her morning digging in the squash garden. Her glasses had been cleaned. The rhinestone-studded rims glittered, and I could actually see her eyes through the lenses. Her hair had been shampooed and corralled with red hair clips. I suspected somebody in the

Demeter cabin had given her some loving care in the grooming department.

Not that I could criticize. I was wearing clothes Will Solace had bought for me.

'Good gardening?' I asked.

'Awesome.' She wiped her nose on her sleeve. 'This new kid, Steve? He made a potato erupt in Douglas's jeans.'

'That does sound awesome.'

'Wish we could stay.' She tossed a chip of quartz into the grass.

My heart felt like an open blister. Thinking about the horrible things that awaited us back in Manhattan, I wanted to grant Meg's wish more than anything. She should have been able to stay at camp, laughing and making friends and watching potatoes erupt from her cabinmates' jeans like any normal kid.

I marvelled at how calm and content she appeared. I'd heard that young people were especially resilient when it came to surviving trauma. They were much tougher than, say, your average immortal. And yet, just for once, I wished I could provide Meg with a safe place to be, without the pressure of having to leave immediately to stop an apocalypse.

'I could go alone,' I found myself saying. 'I could surrender to Nero. There's no reason you have to –'

'Stop,' she ordered.

My throat closed up.

I could do nothing but wait as Meg twirled a blade of grass between her fingers.

'You say that because you don't trust me?' she asked at last.

'*What?*' Her question allowed me to speak again. 'Meg, no, that's not –'

'I betrayed you once,' she said. 'Right here in these woods.'

She didn’t sound sad or ashamed about it, the way she once might have. She spoke with a sort of dreamy disbelief, as if trying to recall the person she’d been six months ago. That was a problem I could relate to.

‘Meg, we’ve both changed a lot since then,’ I said. ‘I trust you with my life. I’m just worried about Nero … how he’ll try to hurt you, *use* you.’

She gave me a look that was almost teacherly, as if cautioning *Are you sure that’s your final answer?*

I realized what she must be thinking: I claimed I wasn’t worried about her betraying me, but I *was* worried about how Nero could manipulate her. Wasn’t that the same thing?

‘I have to go back,’ Meg insisted. ‘I have to see if I’m strong enough.’

Peaches cuddled up next to her as if he had no such concerns.

Meg patted his leafy wings. ‘Maybe I’ve got stronger. But, when I go back to the palace, will it be enough? Can I remember to be who I am now and not … who I was then?’

I didn’t think she expected an answer. But it occurred to me that perhaps I should be asking myself the same question.

Since Jason Grace’s death, I’d spent sleepless nights wondering if I could keep my promise to him. Assuming I made it back to Mount Olympus, could I remember what it was like to be human, or would I slip back into being the self-centred god I used to be?

Change is a fragile thing. It requires time and distance. Survivors of abuse, like Meg, have to get away from their abusers. Going back to that toxic environment was the worst thing she could do. And former arrogant gods like me couldn’t hang around other arrogant gods and expect to stay unsullied.

But I supposed Meg was right. Going back was the only way to see how strong we’d got, even if it meant risking

everything.

'Okay, I'm worried,' I admitted. 'About you. And me. I don't know the answer to your question.'

Meg nodded. 'But we have to try.'

'Together, then,' I said. 'One more time, into the lair of the Beast.'

'Peaches,' Peaches murmured.

Meg smirked. 'He says he'll stay here at camp. He needs some *me* time.'

I hate it when fruit spirits have more sense than me.

That afternoon I filled two quivers with arrows. I polished and restrung my bow. From the cabin's store of musical instruments, I picked a new ukulele – not as nice or durable as the bronze combat ukulele I had lost, but still a fearsome stringed instrument. I made sure I had plenty of medical supplies in my backpack, along with food and drink and the usual change of clothes and clean underwear. (I apologize, underwear!)

I moved through the afternoon hours in a daze, feeling as if I were preparing for a funeral … specifically my own. Austin and Kayla hovered nearby, trying to be helpful when they could, but without invading my space.

'We talked with Sherman and Malcolm,' Kayla told me. 'We'll be on standby.'

'If there is *any* chance we can help,' Austin said, 'we'll be ready to roll at a moment's notice.'

Words were not sufficient to thank them, but I hope they saw the gratitude in my teary, bruised, acne-pocked face.

That night we had the usual singalong at the campfire. No one mentioned our quest. No one offered a going-away good-luck speech. The first-time campers were still so new to the demigod experience, so amazed by it all, I doubted they would even notice we were gone. Perhaps that was for the best.

They didn’t need to know how much was at stake: not just the burning of New York, but whether the Oracle of Delphi would ever be able to give them prophecies and offer them quests, or whether the future would be controlled and predetermined by an evil emperor and a giant reptile.

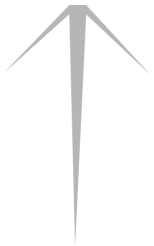
If I failed, these young demigods would grow up in a world where Nero’s tyranny was the norm and there were only eleven Olympians.

I tried to shove those thoughts to the back of my mind. Austin and I played a duet for saxophone and guitar. Then Kayla joined us to lead the camp in a rousing version of ‘The Wheels on the Chariot Go ’Round and ’Round’. We roasted marshmallows, and Meg and I tried to enjoy our final hours among our friends.

Small mercies: that night I had no dreams.

At dawn, Will shook me awake. He and Nico had returned from wherever they had been ‘gathering supplies’, but he didn’t want to talk about it.

Together, he and I met Meg and Nico on the road along the far side of Half-Blood Hill, where the camp’s shuttle bus waited to take us to Rachel Elizabeth Dare’s house in Brooklyn, and – one way or another – the final few days of my mortal life.



12

Billionaire's warehouse.
Grab your chocolate drink quickly,
The cows are watching.

BROOKLYN.

Normally, the greatest dangers there are congested traffic, expensive poke bowls and not enough tables at the local coffee shops for all the aspiring screenwriters. That morning, however, I could tell that our shuttle driver, Argus the giant, was keeping his eyes open for trouble.

This was a big deal for Argus, since he had a hundred sets of eyes all over his body. (I had not actually counted them, nor had I asked if he ever got black eyes on his posterior from sitting too long.)

As we drove down Flushing Avenue, his blue peepers blinked and twitched along his arms, around his neck and on his cheeks and chin, trying to look in every direction at once.

Clearly, he sensed that something was wrong. I felt it, too. There was an electric heaviness in the air, like just before Zeus hurled a massive lightning bolt or Beyoncé dropped a new album. The world was holding its breath.

Argus pulled over a block from the Dare house as if he feared to get any closer.

The harbour-front area had once been working docklands for local fishermen, if I recalled correctly from the 1800s. Then it had been populated mostly by railyards and factories. You could still see the pilings of decayed piers jutting out of the water. Redbrick shells and concrete smokestacks of old workhouses sat dark and abandoned like temple ruins. One open stretch of railyard was still in operation, with a few heavily graffitied freight cars on the tracks.

But, like the rest of Brooklyn, the neighbourhood was rapidly becoming gentrified. Across the street, a building that looked like a one-time machine shop now housed a café promising avocado bagels and pineapple matcha. Two blocks down, cranes loomed from the pit of a construction site. Signs on the fences read HARD HAT AREA, KEEP OUT! and LUXURY RENTALS COMING SOON! I wondered if the construction workers were required to wear luxury hard hats.

The Dare compound itself was a former industrial warehouse transformed into an ultra-modern estate. It occupied an acre of waterfront, making it approximately five billion times larger than the average New York City home. The facade was concrete and steel – like a combination art museum and bombproof bunker.

I had never met Mr Dare, the real-estate mogul, but I felt I didn't need to. I understood gods and their palaces. Mr Dare was operating along the same principles: look at me, look at my massive pad, spread word of my greatness. You may leave your burnt offerings on the welcome mat.

As soon as we were out of the van, Argus floored the accelerator. He sped off in a cloud of exhaust and premium gravel.

Will and Nico exchanged looks.

'I guess he figured we won't need a ride back,' Will said.

'We won't,' Nico said darkly. 'Come on.'

He led us to the main gates – huge panels of corrugated steel without any obvious opening mechanism or even an intercom. I suppose if you had to ask, you couldn't afford to go in.

Nico stood there and waited.

Meg cleared her throat. 'Uh, so –?'

The gates rolled open of their own accord. Standing before us was Rachel Elizabeth Dare.

Like all great artists, she was barefoot. (Leonardo would simply *never* put his sandals on.) Her jeans were covered in marker doodles that had got more complex and colourful over the years. Her white tank top was splattered with paint. Across her face, competing for attention with her orange freckles, were streaks of what looked like acrylic ultramarine blue. Some of it dotted her red hair like confetti.

'Come in quickly,' she said, as if she'd been expecting us for hours. 'The cattle are watching.'

'Yes, I said *cattle* ,' she told me, pre-empting my question as we walked through the house. 'And, no, I'm not crazy. Hi, Meg. Will, Nico. Follow me. We've got the place to ourselves.'

This was like saying we had Yankee Stadium to ourselves. Great, I guess, but I wasn't sure what to do with it.

The mansion was organized around a central atrium – Roman style, looking inwards, so peons outside the walls couldn't ruin your view. But at least the Romans had gardens. Mr Dare seemed to believe only in concrete, metal and gravel. His atrium featured a giant stack of iron and stone that was either a brilliant avant-garde sculpture or a pile of leftover building materials.

We followed Rachel down a wide hall of painted cement, then up a floating stairway into the second level, which I would've called the living quarters, except that nothing about the mansion felt very alive. Rachel herself seemed

small and out of place here, a warm, colourful aberration padding in her bare feet through an architectural mausoleum.

At least her room had floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the neighbouring railyard and the river beyond. Sunlight flooded in, illuminating the oak floors, the speckled tarps that doubled as throw rugs, several beanbag chairs, some open cans of paint, and massive easels where Rachel had six different canvases going at once. Spread across the back part of the floor was another half-finished painting that Rachel seemed to be working on with drips and splashes à la Jackson Pollock. Shoved in one corner were a refrigerator and a simple futon, as if eating and sleeping were complete afterthoughts for her.

'Wow.' Will moved to the windows to soak up the view and the sunshine.

Meg made a beeline for the refrigerator.

Nico drifted to the easels. 'These are amazing.' He traced the air, following the swirls of Rachel's paint across the canvas.

'Eh, thanks,' Rachel said absently. 'Just warm-ups, really.'

They looked more like full aerobic workouts to me – huge, aggressive brushstrokes, thick wedges of colour applied with a mason's trowel, splashes so large she must have swung an entire can of paint to apply them. At first glance, the works appeared to be abstract. Then I stepped back, and the shapes resolved into scenes.

That maroon square was the Waystation in Indianapolis. Those swirls were griffins in flight. A second canvas showed flames engulfing the Burning Maze and, floating in the upper right quadrant, a string of hazy glowing ships – the fleet of Caligula. A third painting … I began to get misty-eyed all over again. It was a funeral pyre – the last rites of Jason Grace.

'You've started having visions again,' I said.

She looked at me with a kind of resentful yearning, as if she were on a sugar detox and I was waving around a chocolate bar. ‘Only glimpses. Every time you free an Oracle, I get a few moments of clarity. Then the fog settles again.’ She pressed her fingertips against her forehead. ‘It’s like Python is inside my brain, toying with me. Sometimes I think …’ She faltered, as if the idea were too disturbing to say aloud. ‘Just tell me you’re going to take him down. *Soon* .’

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. It was one thing for Python to squat in my sacred caverns of Delphi. It was another for him to invade the mind of my chosen Pythia, the priestess of my prophecies. I had accepted Rachel Elizabeth Dare as my most important Oracle. I was responsible for her. If I failed to defeat Python, he would continue to grow stronger. He would eventually control the very flow of the future. And since Rachel was inextricably linked to the Delphic … No. I couldn’t bear to think what that might mean for her.

‘Whoa.’ Meg surfaced from Rachel’s refrigerator like a diver with gold doubloons. In her hand was a Yoo-hoo chocolate drink. ‘Can I have one?’

Rachel managed a smile. ‘Help yourself, Meg. And, hey, di Angelo –’ she pushed him playfully away from the canvas he’d been ogling – ‘don’t brush against the art! I don’t care about the paintings, but if you get any colour on you, you’ll ruin that whole black-and-white aesthetic you’ve got going.’

‘Hmph,’ said Nico.

‘Now what were we talking about …?’ Rachel mused.

Over at the window, Will tapped his knuckles against the glass. ‘Are those the cattle?’

‘Oh, right!’ Rachel steered us in that direction.

About a hundred yards away, between us and the river, a line of three cattle cars sat on the railway tracks. Each car was occupied, as evidenced by the bovine snouts that occasionally poked out between the bars.

‘Seems wrong to just leave them parked there,’ Will said. ‘It’s going to get hot today.’

Rachel nodded. ‘They’ve been there since yesterday. The cars just kind of appeared overnight. I’ve called the freight company, and the animal cruelty hotline. It’s like the cars don’t exist. Nobody has any record of them. Nobody will come out to check on them. Nobody’s brought the animals any food or water –’

‘We should free them,’ Meg said.

‘That would be a very bad idea,’ Nico said.

Meg frowned. ‘Do you hate cows?’

‘I don’t hate –’ Nico paused. ‘Well, okay, I’m not super fond of cows. But that’s not the point. Those can’t be ordinary animals.’ He glanced at Rachel. ‘You said they just appeared. People don’t recognize they exist. You said the cattle were *watching* ?’

Rachel edged away from the window. ‘Sometimes I can see their eyes between the bars. They’ll be looking right at me. And just about the time you arrived, they went crazy, rocking the cars like they were trying to get out. That’s when I checked the security cameras and saw you guys at the front gate. Normally, I am not paranoid about cattle. But these … I don’t know. Something doesn’t feel right. At first, I thought it might have something to do with our neighbours …’

She gestured north along the waterfront to an unremarkable cluster of old residential towers. ‘They do strange things sometimes.’

‘In the housing project?’ I asked.

She arched her eyebrows. ‘You don’t see the big mansion?’

‘What mansion?’

She glanced at Will, Nico, Meg, who all shook their heads.

‘Well,’ Rachel said, ‘you’ll have to take my word for it. There’s a big mansion over there. Lots of weird goings-on.’

We didn't argue with her. Though fully mortal, Rachel had the rare gift of clear sight. She could see through the Mist and other magical barriers better than most demigods, and apparently better than most Lesters.

She muttered, 'Once I saw a penguin waddling around their back deck –'

'A what-now?' Nico asked.

'But leaving cows in boxes like that for days without food or water, that seems like something different,' she said. 'Crueller. Those cows must be bad news.'

Meg scowled. 'They seem peaceful enough now. I still say we free them.'

'And then what?' Nico asked. 'Even if they're not dangerous, we just let three carloads of cattle wander around Brooklyn? I'm with Rachel. Something about this …' He looked like he was trying to dredge something from his memory with no luck – another feeling I knew well. 'I say we leave them alone.'

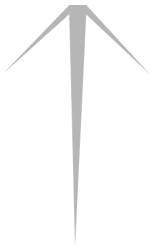
'That's mean!' said Meg. 'We can't –'

'Friends, please.' I stepped between Nico and Meg before things escalated into the biggest Hades/Demeter smackdown since Persephone's wedding shower. 'Since the cattle seem to be calm at the moment, let's circle back to that subject after we've discussed what we came here to discuss, yes?'

'The Tower of Nero,' Rachel surmised.

Will's eyes widened. 'Have you seen the future?'

'No, William, I used simple logic. But I *do* have some information that might help you. Everybody grab a Yoo-hoo and a beanbag, and let's chat about our least-favourite emperor.'



13

There is no blueprint
For taking down emperors.
Wait. Rachel has one.

WE CIRCLED UP OUR BEANBAGS.

Rachel spread blueprints across the floor between us. 'You guys know about the emperor's fasces?'

Meg and I shared a look that meant *I wish we didn't.*

'We're familiar,' I said. 'In San Francisco, we destroyed the fasces of Commodus and Caligula, which made them vulnerable enough to kill. I assume you're suggesting we do the same with Nero?'

Rachel pouted. 'That killed my big reveal. It took me a long time to figure this out.'

'You did great,' Meg assured her. 'Apollo just likes to hear himself talk.'

'I beg your pardon –'

'Did you find the exact location of Nero's fasces?' Nico interrupted. 'Because that would be really useful.'

Rachel straightened a bit. 'I think so, yeah. These are the original designs for Nero's tower. They were *not* easy to get.'

Will whistled appreciatively. ‘I bet many Bothans died to bring us this information.’

Rachel stared at him. ‘What?’

Nico sighed. ‘I’m guessing that was a Star Wars reference. My boyfriend is a Star Wars geek of the worst kind.’

‘Okay, Signor Myth-o-magic. If you would just watch the original trilogy …’ Will looked at the rest of us for support and found nothing but blank expressions. ‘Nobody? Oh, my gods. You people are hopeless.’

‘Anyway,’ Rachel continued, ‘my theory is that Nero would keep his fasces here.’ She tapped a point about halfway up the tower’s cross-section schematic. ‘Right in the middle of the building. It’s the only level with no exterior windows. Special-elevator access only. All doors are Celestial-bronze-reinforced. I mean, the whole building is a fortress, but this level would be *impossible* to break into.’

Meg nodded. ‘I know the floor you mean. We were never allowed in there. *Ever* .’

A chill settled over our little group. Goose bumps dotted Will’s arms. The idea of Meg, *our* Meg, stuck in that fortress of evil was more disturbing than any number of mysterious cows or penguins.

Rachel flipped to another blueprint – a floor plan of the ultra-secure level. ‘Here. This vault has to be it. You could never get close, unless …’ She pointed to a nearby room. ‘If I’m reading these designs correctly, this would be a holding cell for prisoners.’ Her eyes were bright with excitement. ‘If you could get yourself captured, then convince someone on the inside to help you escape –’

‘Lu was right.’ Meg looked at me triumphantly. ‘I *told* you.’

Rachel frowned, bringing the blue paint spots on her forehead into a tighter cluster. ‘Who is Lu?’

We told her about Luguselwa, and the special bonding time we'd shared before I threw her off a building.

Rachel shook her head. 'Okay … so if you've already thought of all my ideas, why am I even talking?'

'No, no,' Will said. 'You're *confirming* . And we trust you more than … er, other sources.'

I hoped he meant Lu and not me.

'Besides,' Nico said, 'you have actual blueprints.' He studied the floor plan. 'Why would Nero keep his prisoners on the same level as his most valuable possession, though?'

'Keep your fasces close,' I speculated, 'and your enemies closer.'

'Maybe,' Rachel said. 'But the fasces is heavily protected, and not just by security features or regular guards. There's something *in* that vault, something alive …'

It was my turn to get goosebumps. 'How do you know this?'

'A vision. Just a glimpse, almost like … like Python *wanted* me to see it. The figure looked like a man, but his head –'

'A lion's head,' I guessed.

Rachel flinched. 'Exactly. And slithering around his body –'

'Snakes.'

'So you know what it is?'

I grasped for the memory. As usual, it was just out of reach. You may wonder why I didn't have a better handle on my godly knowledge, but my mortal brain was an imperfect storage facility. I can only compare my frustration to how you might feel when taking a picky reading-comprehension quiz. You are assigned fifty pages. You actually *read* them. Then the teacher decides to test you by asking, *Quick! What was the first word on page thirty-seven?*

'I'm not sure,' I admitted. 'Some sort of powerful guardian, obviously. Our most recent prophecy stanza

mentioned a *lion, snake-entwined* .' I filled Rachel in on our literally eye-popping ride with the Grey Sisters.

Nico scowled at the blueprints, as if he might intimidate them into giving up their secrets. 'So, whatever the guardian is, Nero trusts it with his life. Meg, I thought you said Luguselwa was this huge, mighty warrior?'

'She is.'

'So why can't she take out this guardian and destroy the fasces herself?' he asked. 'Why does she need … you know, you guys to get yourself captured?'

Nico phrased the question diplomatically, but I heard what he meant. If Lu couldn't take out this guardian, how could I, Lester Papadopoulos, the Not So Huge or Mighty?

'Dunno,' Meg said. 'But there must be a reason.'

Like Lu would rather see us *get killed,* I thought, but I knew better than to say that.

'Let's assume Lu is right,' Nico said. 'You get captured and put in this cell. She lets you out. You kill the guardian, destroy the fasces, weaken Nero, hooray. Even then, and I'm sorry to be a Debbie Downer –'

'I am calling you Debbie Downer from now on,' Will said gleefully.

'Shut up, Solace. Even *then* , you've got half a tower and Nero's whole army of security guards between you and his throne room, right?'

'We've dealt with whole armies before,' Meg said.

Nico laughed, which I didn't know he was capable of. 'Okay. I like the confidence. But wasn't there that little detail about Nero's panic switch? If he feels threatened, he can blow up New York at the push of a button. How do you stop *that* ?'

'Oh …' Rachel muttered a curse not appropriate for priestesses. 'That must be what *these* are for.'

Her hands trembling, she flipped to another page of the blueprints.

‘I asked my dad’s senior architect about them,’ she said. ‘He couldn’t figure them out. Said there’s no way the blueprints could be right. Sixty feet underground, surrounded by triple retaining walls. Giant vats, like the building has its own reservoir or water-treatment facility. It’s connected to the city’s sewer mains, but the separate electrical grid, the generators, these pumps … It’s like the whole system is designed to blast water *outwards* and flood the city.’

‘Except not with water,’ Will said. ‘With Greek fire.’

‘Debbie Downer,’ Nico muttered.

I stared at the schematics, trying to imagine how such a system could have been built. During our last battle in the Bay Area, Meg and I had seen more Greek fire than had existed in the whole history of the Byzantine Empire. Nero had more. Exponentially more. It seemed impossible, but the emperor had had hundreds of years to plan, and almost infinite resources. Leave it to Nero to spend most of his money on a self-destruct system.

‘He’ll burn up, too,’ I marvelled. ‘All his family and guards, and his precious tower.’

‘Maybe not,’ Rachel said. ‘The building is designed for self-containment. Thermal insulation, closed air circulation, reinforced heat-resistant materials. Even the windows are special blast-proof panes. Nero could burn the city down around him, and his tower would be the only thing left standing.’

Meg crumpled her empty Yoo-hoo box. ‘Sounds like him.’

Will studied the plans. ‘I’m not an expert on reading these things, but where are the access points to the vats?’

‘There’s only one,’ Rachel said. ‘Sealed off, automated, heavily guarded and under constant surveillance. Even if you could break or sneak through, you wouldn’t have enough time to disable the generators before Nero pushed his panic button.’

‘Unless,’ Nico said, ‘you tunnelled your way into those reservoirs from underneath. You could sabotage his whole delivery system without Nero ever knowing.’

‘Aaand we’re back to *that* terrible idea,’ Will said.

‘They’re the best tunnellers in the world,’ Nico insisted. ‘They could get through all that concrete and steel and Celestial bronze with no one even noticing. This is *our* part of the plan, Will. While Apollo and Meg are getting themselves captured, keeping Nero distracted, *we* go underground and take out his doomsday weapon.’

‘Hold on, Nico,’ I said. ‘It’s high time you explained who these cave-runners are.’

The son of Hades fixed his dark eyes on me as if I were another layer of concrete to dig through. ‘A few months ago, I made contact with the troglodytes.’

I choked on a laugh. Nico’s claim was the most ridiculous thing I’d heard since Mars swore to me that Elvis Presley was alive on, well, Mars.

‘Troglodytes are a myth,’ I said.

Nico frowned. ‘A god is telling a demigod that something is a myth?’

‘Oh, you know what I mean! They aren’t *real* . That trashy author Aelian made them up to sell more copies of his books back in Ancient Rome. A race of subterranean humanoids who eat lizards and fight bulls? Please. I’ve never seen them. Not once in my millennia of life.’

‘Did it ever occur to you,’ Nico said, ‘that troglodytes might go out of their way to hide from a sun god? They hate the light.’

‘Well, I –’

‘Did you ever actually look for them?’ Nico persisted.

‘Well, no, but –’

‘They’re real,’ Will confirmed. ‘Unfortunately, Nico found them.’

I tried to process this information. I’d never taken Aelian’s stories about the troglodytes seriously. To be fair,

though, I hadn’t believed in rocs, either, until the day one flew over my sun chariot and bowel-bombed me. That was a bad day for me, the roc and several countries that my swerving chariot set on fire.

‘If you say so. But do you know how to find the troglodytes again?’ I asked. ‘Do you think they would help us?’

‘Those are two different questions,’ Nico said. ‘But I think I can convince them to help. Maybe. If they like the gift I got them. And if they don’t kill us on sight.’

‘I love this plan,’ Will grumbled.

‘Guys,’ Rachel said, ‘you forgot about *me* .’

I stared at her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m coming, too.’

‘Certainly not!’ I protested. ‘You’re mortal!’

‘And essential,’ Rachel said. ‘Your prophecy told you so. *A Dare reveals the path that was unknown.* All I’ve done so far is show you blueprints, but I can do more. I can see things you can’t. Besides, I’ve got a personal stake in this. If you don’t survive the Tower of Nero, you can’t fight Python. And if you can’t defeat him …’

Her voice faltered. She swallowed and doubled over, choking.

At first, I thought some of her Yoo-hoo might have gone down the wrong way. I patted her on the back unhelpfully. Then she sat up again, her back rigid, her eyes glowing. Smoke billowed from her mouth, which is not something normally caused by chocolate drinks.

Will, Nico and Meg scooted away in their beanbags.

I would have done the same, but for half a second I thought I understood what was happening: a prophecy! Her Delphic powers had broken through!

Then, with sickening dread, I realized this smoke was the wrong colour: pallid yellow instead of dark green. And the stench … sour and decayed, like it was wafting straight from Python’s armpits.

When Rachel spoke, it was with Python's voice – a gravelly rumble, charged with malice.

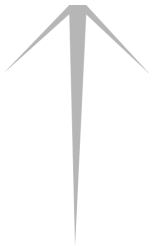
> *'Apollo's flesh and blood shall soon be mine.*
> *Alone he must descend into the dark,*
> *This sibyl never again to see his sign,*
> *Lest grappling with me till his final spark*
> *The god dissolves, leaving not a mark.'*

The smoke dissipated. Rachel slumped against me, her body limp.

CRASH! A sound like shattering metal shook my bones. I was so terrified that I wasn't sure if the noise was from somewhere outside, or if it was just my nervous system shutting down.

Nico got up and ran to the windows. Meg scrambled over to help me with Rachel. Will checked her pulse and started to say, 'We need to get her –'

'Hey!' Nico turned from the window, his face pale with shock. 'We have to get out of here *now* . The cows are attacking.'



14

I fall in a hole
And choke on my own anger.
I am a cow. Moo.

IN NO CONTEXT CAN *THE COWS ARE ATTACKING* be considered good news.

Will picked up Rachel in a firefighter's lift – for a gentle healer, he was deceptively strong – and together we jogged over to join Nico at the window.

In the railyard below, the cows were staging a revolution. They'd busted through the sides of their cattle cars like an avalanche through a picket fence and were now stampeding towards the Dare residence. I suspected the cattle hadn't been *trapped* in those cars at all. They'd simply been waiting for the right moment to break out and kill us.

They were beautiful in a nightmarish way. Each was twice the size of a normal bovine, with bright blue eyes and shaggy red hair that rippled in dizzying whorls like a living Van Gogh painting. Both cows and bulls – yes, I could tell the difference; I was a cow expert – possessed huge curved horns that would have made excellent drinking cups for the largest and thirstiest of Lu's Celtic kinfolk.

A line of freight cars stood between us and the cows, but that didn't deter the herd. They barrelled straight through, toppling and flattening the cars like origami boxes.

'Do we fight?' Meg asked, her voice full of doubt.

The name of these creatures suddenly came back to me – too late, as usual. Earlier, I'd mentioned that troglodytes were known for fighting bulls, but I hadn't put the facts together. Perhaps Nero had parked the cattle cars here as a trap, knowing we might seek out Rachel's help. Or perhaps their presence was simply the Fates' cruel way of laughing at me. *Oh, you want to play the troglodyte card? We counter with cows!*

'Fighting would be no use,' I said miserably. 'Those are *tauri silvestres – forest bulls* , the Romans called them. Their hides cannot be pierced. According to legend, the tauri are ancestral enemies of Nico's friends, the troglodytes.'

'So *now* you believe the trogs exist?' Nico asked.

'I am learning to believe in all sorts of things that can kill me!'

The first wave of cattle reached the Dares' retaining wall. They ploughed through it and charged the house.

'We need to run!' I said, exercising my noble duty as Lord Obvious of Duh.

Nico led the way. Will followed close behind with Rachel still draped over his shoulder, Meg and me at his back.

We were halfway down the hall when the house began to shake. Cracks zigzagged up the walls. At the top of the floating staircase, we discovered (fun fact) a floating staircase will cease to float if a forest bull tries to climb it. The lower steps had been stripped from the wall. Bulls rampaged through the corridor below like a crowd of Black Friday bargain hunters, stomping on broken steps and crashing through the atrium's glass walls, renovating the Dares' house with extreme prejudice.

'At least they can't get up here,' Will said.

The floor shook again as the tauri took out another wall.

'We'll be down *there* soon enough,' Meg said. 'Is there another way out?'

Rachel groaned. 'Me. Down.'

Will eased her to her feet. She swayed and blinked, trying to process the scene below us.

'Cows,' Rachel said.

'Yeah,' Nico agreed.

Rachel pointed weakly down the hall we'd come from. 'This way.'

Using Meg as a crutch, Rachel led us back towards her bedroom. She took a sharp right, then clambered down another set of stairs into the garage. On the polished concrete floor sat two Ferraris, both bright red – because why have one midlife crisis when you can have two? In the house behind us, I could hear the cows bellowing angrily, crashing and smashing as they remodelled the Dare compound for that hot *apocalyptic barnyard* look.

'Keys,' Rachel said. 'Look for car keys!'

Will, Nico and I scrambled into action. We found no keys in the cars – that would have been too convenient. No keys on the wall hooks, in the storage bins or on the shelves. Either Mr Dare kept the keys with him at all times, or the Ferraris were meant to be purely decorative.

'Nothing!' I said.

Rachel muttered something about her father that I won't repeat. 'Never mind.' She hit a button on the wall. The garage door began to rumble open. 'I'm feeling better. We'll go on foot.'

We spilled into the street and headed north as fast as Rachel could hobble. We were half a block away when the Dare residence shuddered, groaned and imploded, exhaling a mushroom cloud of dust and debris.

'Rachel, I'm so sorry,' Will said.

'Don't care. I hated that place anyway. Dad will just move us to one of his *other* mansions.'

‘But your art!’ Meg said.

Rachel’s expression tightened. ‘Art can be made again. People can’t. Keep moving!’

I knew we wouldn’t have long before the tauri silvestres found us. Along this part of the Brooklyn waterfront, the blocks were long, the roads wide and the sight lines clear – perfect for a supernatural stampede. We had almost made it to the pineapple matcha café when Meg yelled, ‘The Sylvesters are coming!’

‘Meg,’ I wheezed, ‘the cows are not all named Sylvester.’

She was right about the threat, though. The demon cattle, apparently unfazed by a building falling on them, emerged from the wreckage of Chez Dare. The herd began to regroup in the middle of the street, shaking rubble from their red hides like dogs fresh from a bath.

‘Get out of sight?’ Nico asked, pointing to the café.

‘Too late,’ Will said.

The cows had spotted us. A dozen sets of blue eyes fixed on our position. The tauri raised their heads, mooed their battle moos and charged. I suppose we could still have ducked into the café, just so the cows would destroy it and save the neighbourhood from the threat of avocado bagels. Instead, we ran.

I realized this would only delay the inevitable. Even if Rachel hadn’t been groggy from her snake-induced trance, we couldn’t outrun the cows.

‘They’re gaining!’ Meg yelled. ‘You sure we can’t fight them?’

‘You want to try?’ I asked. ‘After what they did to the house?’

‘So what’s their weakness?’ Rachel asked. ‘They have to have an Achilles’ heel!’

Why did people always assume this? Why did they obsess about an Achilles’ heel? Just because *one* Greek hero had a vulnerable spot behind his foot, that didn’t mean every monster, demigod and villain from Ancient Greek times also

had a podiatric problem. Most monsters, in fact, did *not* have a secret weakness. They were annoying that way.

Nevertheless, I racked my brain for any factoids I might have gleaned from Aelian's trashy bestseller *On the Nature of Animals* . (Not that I normally read such things, of course.)

'Pits?' I speculated. 'I think farmers in Ethiopia used pits against the tauri.'

'Like peach pits?' Meg asked.

'No, like pits in the ground!'

'Fresh out of pits!' Rachel said.

The tauri had halved the distance between us. Another hundred yards and they would smash us into road jelly.

'There!' Nico yelled. 'Follow me!'

He sprinted into the lead.

I had to give him credit. When Nico chose a pit, he went for broke. He ran to the luxury-apartment construction site, summoned his black Stygian sword from thin air and slashed through the chain-link fence. We followed him inside, where a narrow rim of trailers and portable potties surrounded a fifty-foot-deep square crater. A giant crane rose from the centre of the chasm, its jib extending towards us at just about knee-level. The site seemed abandoned. Perhaps it was lunch hour? Perhaps all the workers were at the pineapple matcha café? Whatever the case, I was glad not to have mortals in the way of danger.

(Look at me, caring about innocent bystanders. The other Olympians would have teased me mercilessly.)

'Nico,' Rachel said, 'this is more of a canyon.'

'It's all we've got!' Nico ran to the edge of the pit … and jumped.

My heart felt like it jumped with him. I may have screamed.

Nico sailed over the abyss and landed on the crane's arm without even stumbling. He turned and extended his arm.

‘Come on! It’s only like eight feet. We practise bigger jumps at camp over lava!’

‘Maybe *you* do,’ I said.

The ground shook. The herd was right behind us.

Will backed up, took a running leap and landed next to Nico. He looked back at us with a reassuring nod. ‘See? It’s not that bad! We’ll grab you!’

Rachel went next – no problem. Then Meg, the flying valentine. When her feet hit the crane, the whole arm creaked and shifted to the right, forcing my friends into a surfer’s stance to catch their balance.

‘Apollo,’ Rachel said, ‘hurry!’

She wasn’t looking at me. She was looking *behind* me. The rumble of the herd was now a jackhammer in my spine.

I leaped, landing on the crane arm with the greatest belly flop since Icarus crashed into the Aegean.

My friends grabbed my arms to keep me from rolling into the abyss. I sat up, wheezing and groaning, just as the tauri reached the edge of the pit.

I hoped they would charge over and fall to their deaths like lemmings. Though, of course, lemmings don’t actually do that. Bless their tiny hearts, lemmings are too smart to commit mass suicide. Unfortunately, so were the devil cows.

The first few tauri did indeed topple into the pit, unable to stop their momentum, but the rest of the herd successfully applied the brakes. There was a great deal of shoving and jostling and angry mooing from the back ranks, but it appeared that the one thing a forest bull could not smash through was another forest bull.

I muttered some bad words I hadn’t used since #MinoansFirst was trending on social media. Across the narrow gap, the tauri stared at us with their murderous baby-blue eyes. The sour stench of their breath and the funk of their hides made my nostrils want to curl inwards and die. The animals fanned out around the lip of the

chasm, but none tried to jump to the crane arm. Perhaps they'd learned their lesson from the Dares' floating staircase. Or perhaps they were smart enough to realize that hooves wouldn't do them much good on narrow steel girders.

Far below, the half-dozen fallen cattle were starting to get up, apparently unhurt by the fifty-foot drop. They paced around, mooing in outrage. Around the rim of the pit, the rest of the herd stood in a silent vigil as their fallen comrades grew more and more distressed. The six didn't seem physically injured, but their voices were clogged with rage. Their neck muscles bulged. Their eyes swelled. They stamped the ground, foamed at the mouth and then, one by one, fell over and lay motionless. Their bodies began to wither, their flesh dissolving until only their empty red hides remained.

Meg sobbed.

I couldn't blame her. Devilish or not, the cows' deaths were horrible to watch.

'What just happened?' Rachel's voice trembled.

'They choked on their own anger,' I said. 'I – I didn't think it was possible, but apparently Aelian got it right. Silvestres hate being stuck in pits so much they just … gag and die. It's the only way to kill them.'

Meg shuddered. 'That's awful.'

The herd stared at us in apparent agreement. Their blue eyes were like laser beams burning into my face. I got the feeling they'd been after us before just because it was in their nature to kill. Now, it was personal.

'So what do we do about the rest of them?' Will asked. 'Dad, you sure you can't …' He gestured at our bovine audience. 'I mean, you've got a god-level bow and two quivers of arrows at basically point-blank range.'

'Will!' Meg protested. Watching the bulls choke in the pit seemed to have sapped all her willingness to fight.

'I'm sorry, Meg,' Will said. 'But we're kind of stuck here.'

‘It won’t do any good,’ I promised. ‘Watch.’

I drew my bow. I nocked an arrow and aimed at the nearest cow. The cow simply stared back at me like, *Really, dude?*

I let the arrow fly – a perfect shot, right between the eyes with enough force to penetrate stone. The shaft splintered against the cow’s forehead.

‘Wow,’ Nico said. ‘Hard head.’

‘It’s the entire hide,’ I told him. ‘Look.’

I shot a second arrow at the cow’s neck. The creature’s shaggy red hair rippled, deflecting the arrowhead and turning the shaft downward so it skittered between the cow’s legs.

‘I could shoot at them all day,’ I said. ‘It won’t help.’

‘We can just wait them out,’ Meg suggested. ‘They’ll get tired eventually and leave, right?’

Rachel shook her head. ‘You forgot they waited outside my house in hot cattle cars for two days with no food or water until you showed up. I’m pretty sure these things can outlast us.’

I shivered. ‘And we have a deadline. If we don’t surrender to Nero by tonight …’ I made the *explode-y hands* gesture.

Will frowned. ‘You might not get the *chance* to surrender. If Nero sent these cows, he might already know you’re here. His men could be on the way.’

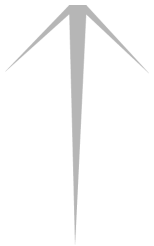
My mouth tasted like cow breath. I remembered what Luguselwa had told us about Nero having eyes everywhere. For all I knew, this construction site was one of the Triumvirate’s projects. Surveillance drones might be hovering overhead right now …

‘We have to get out of here,’ I decided.

‘We could climb down the crane,’ Will said. ‘The cows couldn’t follow us.’

‘But then what?’ Rachel asked. ‘We’d be trapped in the pit.’

‘Maybe not.’ Nico stared into the chasm like he was calculating how many bodies could be buried in it. ‘I see some good shadows down there. If we can reach the bottom safely … How do you all feel about shadow-travel?’



15

It’s raining red cows,
But I don’t care.
I’m singing, Singing in the cows!

I LOVED THE IDEA. I WAS IN FAVOUR OF *ANY* kind of travel that would get us away from the tauri. I would have even summoned the Grey Sisters again, except I doubted their taxi would appear on a crane jib, and, if it *did* , I suspected the sisters would instantly fall in love with Nico and Will because they were so cute together. I wouldn’t wish that kind of attention on anyone.

Single file, we crawled towards the centre of the crane like a line of bedraggled ants. I tried not to look at the carcasses of the dead bulls below, but I could feel the malevolent gaze of the other silvestres as they tracked our progress. I had a sneaking suspicion they were placing bets on which of us would fall first.

Halfway to the main tower, Rachel spoke up behind me. ‘Hey, are you going to tell me what happened back there?’

I glanced over my shoulder. The wind whipped Rachel’s red hair around her face, making it swirl like the bulls’ fur.

I tried to process her question. Had she missed the killer cows destroying her house? Had she been sleepwalking

when she jumped onto the crane?

Then I realized she meant her prophetic trance. We'd been so busy running for our lives that I hadn't had time to think about it. Judging from my past experience with Delphic Oracles, I imagined Rachel had no recollection of what she'd said.

'You completed our prophecy,' I said. 'The last stanza of terza rima, plus a closing couplet. Except …'

'Except?'

'I'm afraid you were channelling Python.'

I crawled ahead, my eyes fixed on the tread of Meg's shoes, as I explained to Rachel what had happened: the yellow smoke boiling from her mouth, the glow of her eyes, the horribly deep voice of the serpent. I repeated the lines that she'd spoken.

She was silent for a count of five. 'That sounds bad.'

'My expert interpretation as well.'

My fingers felt numb against the girders. The prophecy's line about me dissolving, leaving no mark – those words seemed to work their way into my circulatory system, erasing my veins and arteries.

'We'll figure it out,' Rachel promised. 'Maybe Python was twisting my words. Maybe those lines aren't part of the real prophecy.'

I didn't look back, but I could hear the determination in her voice. Rachel had been dealing with Python's slithery presence in her head, possibly for months. She'd been struggling with it alone, trying to keep her sanity by working through her visions in her artwork. Today, she had been possessed by Python's voice and encircled by his poisonous fumes. Still, her first instinct was to reassure *me* that everything would be okay.

'I wish you were right,' I said. 'But the longer Python controls Delphi, the more he can poison the future. Whether he twisted your words or not, they are now part of the prophecy. What you predicted *will* happen.'

Apollo's flesh and blood shall soon be mine. The serpent's voice seemed to coil inside my head. *Alone he must descend into the dark* .

Shut up, I told the voice. But I was not Meg, and Python was not my Lester.

'Well, then,' Rachel said behind me, 'we'll just have to make sure the prophecy happens in a way that *doesn't* get you dissolved.'

She made it sound so doable … so *possible* .

'I don't deserve a priestess like you,' I said.

'No, you don't,' Rachel agreed. 'You can repay me by killing Python and getting the snake fumes out of my head.'

'Deal,' I said, trying to believe I could hold up my side of the bargain.

At last we reached the crane's central mast. Nico led us down the rungs of the ladder. My limbs shook with exhaustion. I was tempted to ask Meg if she could create another latticework of plants to carry us to the bottom like she'd done at Sutro Tower. I decided against it, because 1) I didn't want her to pass out from the effort, and 2) I really hated being tossed around by plants.

By the time we reached the ground, I felt wobbly and nauseated.

Nico didn't look much better. How he planned to summon enough energy to shadow-zap us to safety, I couldn't imagine. Above us, around the rim of the pit, the tauri watched in silence, their blue eyes gleaming like a string of angry Hanukkah lights.

Meg studied them warily. 'Nico, how soon can you shadow us out?'

'Catch … my … breath … first,' he said between gulps of air.

'Please,' Will agreed. 'If he's too tired, he might teleport us into a vat of Cheez Whiz in Venezuela.'

'Okay …' said Nico. 'We didn't end up *in* the vat.'

‘Pretty close,’ Will said. ‘Definitely in the middle of Venezuela’s biggest Cheez Whiz processing plant.’

‘That was *one* time,’ Nico grumbled.

‘Uh, guys?’ Rachel pointed to the rim of the pit, where the cows were becoming agitated. They jostled and pushed each other forward until one – either by choice or with pressure from the herd – toppled off the edge.

Watching it fall, kicking its legs and torquing its body, I remembered the time Ares dropped a cat from Mount Olympus to prove it would land on its feet in Manhattan. Athena had teleported the cat to safety, then beat Ares with the butt of her spear for putting the animal in danger, but the fall had been terrifying to witness, nonetheless.

The bull was not as lucky as the cat. It landed sideways in the dirt with a throaty grunt. The impact would have killed most creatures, but the bull just flailed its legs, righted itself and shook its horns. It glared at us as if to say, *Oh, you’re gonna get it now.*

‘Um …’ Will edged backwards. ‘It’s in the pit. So why isn’t it choking on its rage?’

‘I – I think it’s because *we’re* here?’ My voice sounded like I’d been sucking helium. ‘It wants to kill us more than it wants to choke to death?’

‘Great,’ Meg said. ‘Nico, shadow-travel. Now.’

Nico winced. ‘I can’t take all of you at once! Two plus me is pushing it. Last summer, with the Athena Parthenos … That almost killed me, and I had Reyna’s help.’

The bull charged.

‘Take Will and Rachel,’ I said, hardly believing the words were coming out of my mouth. ‘Return for Meg and me when you can.’

Nico started to protest.

‘Apollo’s right!’ Meg said. ‘Go!’

We didn’t wait for a response. I drew my bow. Meg summoned her scimitars, and together we raced into battle.

There’s an old saying: the definition of insanity is shooting an invulnerable cow in the face over and over and expecting a different result.

I went insane. I shot arrow after arrow at the bull – aiming at its mouth, its eyes, its nostrils, hoping to find a soft spot. Meanwhile, Meg slashed and stabbed with gusto, weaving like a boxer to keep away from the creature’s horns. Her blades were useless. The bull’s shaggy red hide swirled and rippled, deflecting each hit.

We only stayed alive because the bull couldn’t decide which of us to kill first. It kept changing its mind and reversing course as we took turns annoying it.

Perhaps if we kept up the pressure, we could tire out the bull. Sadly, we were also tiring out ourselves, and dozens more bulls waited above, curious to see how their friend fared before they risked the fall themselves.

‘Pretty cow!’ Meg yelled, stabbing it in the face and then dancing out of horn range. ‘Please go away!’

‘It’s having too much fun!’ I said.

My next shot was the dreaded Triple P – the perfect posterior perforator. It didn’t seem to hurt the bull, but I definitely got its attention. The animal bellowed and whirled to face me, its blue eyes blazing with fury.

While it studied me, probably deciding which of my limbs it wanted to pull off and beat me over the head with, Meg glanced at the rim of the pit.

‘Um, hey, Apollo?’

I risked a look. A second bull tumbled into the pit. It landed on top of a portable toilet, crushing the box into a fibreglass pancake, then extracted itself from the wreckage and cried, ‘Moooo!’ (Which I suspected was Tauri for *I totally meant to do that!*)

‘I’ll take Potty Cow,’ I told Meg. ‘You distract our friend here.’

A completely random division of duties – in no way related to the fact that I did not want to face the bull I’d

just poked in the nether region.

Meg began dancing with Cow the First as I charged towards Potty Cow. I was feeling good, feeling heroic, until I reached for my quivers and found myself out of arrows … except for Ye Olde Standby, the Arrow of Dodona, which would not appreciate being used against an invulnerable bovine butt.

I was already committed, though, so I ran at Potty Cow with great bravado and zero clue how to fight it.

‘Hey!’ I yelled, waving my arms in the dubious hope that I might look scary. ‘Blah, blah, blah! Go away!’

The cow attacked.

This would have been an excellent time for my godly strength to kick in, so of course that didn’t happen. Just before the bull could run me down, I screamed and leaped aside.

At that point, the bull should have executed a slow course correction, running around the entire perimeter of the pit to give me time to recover. I’d dated a matador in Madrid once who assured me bulls did this because they were courteous animals and also terrible at sharp turns.

Either my matador was a liar, or he’d never fought tauri. The bull pivoted in a perfect about-face and charged me again. I rolled to one side, desperately grabbing for anything that might help me. I came up holding the edge of a blue polyurethane tarp. Worst shield ever.

The bull promptly jabbed its horn through the material. I jumped back as it stepped on the tarp and got pulled down by its own weight like a person stumbling over their own toga. (Not that I had ever done this, but I’d heard stories.)

The bull roared, shaking its head to dislodge the tarp, which only got it more tangled up in the fabric. I retreated, trying to catch my breath.

About fifty feet to my left, Meg was playing death-tag with Cow the First. She looked unharmed, but I could tell she was tiring, her reaction times slowing.

More cows began to fall into the pit like large, uncoordinated Acapulco cliff-divers. I recalled something Dionysus had once told me about his twin sons, Castor and Pollux – back when he was living with his mortal wife during a short phase of 'domestic bliss'. He'd claimed that two was the best number for children, because after two your children outnumbered you.

The same was true for killer cows. Meg and I could not hope to fend off more than a pair of them. Our only hope was … My eyes fixed on the mast of the crane.

'Meg!' I yelled. 'Back to the ladder!'

She tried to comply, but Cow the First stood between her and the crane. I whipped out my ukulele and ran in their direction.

'Cowie, cowie, cow!' I strummed desperately. 'Hey, cow! Bad, cow! Run away, cowie, cowie, cow!'

I doubted the tune would win any Grammys, but I was hoping it might at least distract Cow the First long enough for Meg to get around it. The cow stayed stubbornly put. So did Meg.

I reached her side. I glanced back in time to see Potty Cow throw off the tarp and charge towards us. The newly fallen cows were also getting to their hooves.

I estimated we had about ten seconds to live.

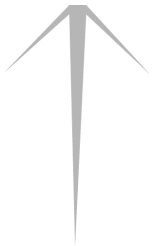
'Go,' I told Meg. 'J-jump the cow and climb the ladder. I'll –'

I didn't know how to finish that statement. *I'll stay here and die? I'll compose another verse of 'Cowie, Cowie, Cow'?*

Just as Cow the First lowered its horns and charged, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

Nico di Angelo's voice said, 'Gotcha.'

And the world turned cold and dark.



16

Will Solace, healer,
The hero we don't deserve,
He has Kit Kat bars.

'*JUMP THE COW?*' MEG DEMANDED. '*THAT* was your plan?'

The five of us sat in a sewer, which was something I'd grown accustomed to. Meg seemed to be bouncing back quickly from her shadow-travel sickness, thanks to Will's timely administration of nectar and Kit Kat bars. I, however, still felt like I was coming down with the flu: chills, body aches, disorientation. I was not ready to be assaulted for my choices in combat.

'I was improvising,' I said. 'I didn't want to see you die.'

Meg threw her hands up. 'And I didn't want to see *you* die, dummy. Did you think of that?'

'Guys,' Rachel interrupted, a cold pack pressed against her head. 'How about none of us lets any of us die? Okay?'

Will checked her bruised temple. 'Feeling any better?'

'I'll be fine,' Rachel said, then explained for my benefit: 'I managed to stumble into the wall when we teleported here.'

Nico looked sheepish. 'Sorry about that.'

‘Hey, I’m not complaining,’ Rachel said. ‘Better than being trampled.’

‘Guess so,’ he said. ‘Once we …’

Nico’s eyelids fluttered. His pupils rolled up in his head and he slumped against Will’s shoulder. It might have been a clever ploy to fall into his boyfriend’s arms – I had used the *catch me, handsome* fainting trick a few times myself – but since Nico immediately began to snore, I decided he was not faking.

‘That’s night-night for Nico.’ Will pulled a travel pillow from his supply bag, which I suspected he carried just for these occasions. He eased the son of Hades into a comfortable sleeping position, then gave us a weary smile. ‘He’ll need about half an hour to recover. Until then, we might as well make ourselves comfortable.’

On the bright side, I’d had plenty of experience getting comfortable in sewers, and Nico had shadow-travelled us to the New York drainage system’s equivalent of the presidential suite.

The vaulted ceiling was adorned with a redbrick herringbone pattern. Along either wall, terracotta pipes dripped only the finest goo into a canal running down the middle of the floor. The concrete ledge upon which we sat was comfortably upholstered with lichen and scum. In the dim golden glow of Meg’s swords – our only illumination – the tunnel looked almost romantic.

Given New York rental prices, I imagined a place like this could go for quite a bit. Running water. Privacy. Lots of space. Great bones – mouse bones, chicken bones and some others I couldn’t identify. And did I mention the stench? The stench was included at no extra cost.

Will tended to our various cuts and scrapes, which were surprisingly light given our morning’s adventures. He insisted we partake liberally of his medicinal stockpile of Kit Kat bars.

‘The best thing for recovering from shadow-travel,’ he assured us.

Who was I to argue with the healing powers of chocolate and wafers?

We ate in silence for a while. Rachel held the cold pack against her head and stared glumly at the sewer water as if waiting for pieces of her family home to float by. Meg sprinkled seeds into the scum patches next to her, causing luminous mushrooms to pop into existence like tiny umbrellas. When life gives you scum, make mushrooms, I suppose.

‘Those forest bulls were amazing,’ Meg said after a while. ‘If you could train them to carry …’

I groaned. ‘It was bad enough when you weaponized unicorns.’

‘Yeah. That was great.’ She looked down the tunnel in both directions. ‘Does anyone know how we can get out of here?’

‘Nico does.’ Will’s eye twitched. ‘Although he’s not going to take us *out* so much as *down* .’

‘To the troglodytes,’ Rachel guessed. ‘What are they like?’

Will moved his hands as if trying to shape something out of clay or indicate the size of a fish he’d caught. ‘I – I can’t describe them,’ he decided.

That wasn’t reassuring. As my child, Will was bound to have some of my poetic ability. If the troglodytes defied description in your average sonnet or limerick, I didn’t want to meet them.

‘I hope they can help.’ Rachel held up her palm to ward off Will, who was coming to check on her bruised head again. ‘I’m okay now, thanks.’

She smiled, but her voice was strained. I knew she liked Will. I also knew she had issues with personal space. Becoming the Pythia tended to do that to you. Having the power of Delphi possess your body and soul at random

intervals could make you tetchy about people getting too close without your consent. Having Python whispering inside your head probably didn't help, either.

'I get it.' Will sat back. 'You've had a rough morning. I'm sorry we brought that kind of trouble to your door.'

Rachel shrugged. 'Like I said, I think I'm *supposed* to be in this trouble. It's not your fault. *A* Dare *reveals the path that was unknown.* For once, I'm part of the prophecy.'

She sounded strangely proud of this fact. Perhaps, after issuing perilous quests for so many other people, Rachel found it nice to be included in our communal death-wish adventure. People like to be seen – even if it's by the cold, cruel eyes of fate.

'Is it safe for you to come along, though?' Meg asked. 'Like … if you've got Python in your head or whatever? Won't he see what we're doing?'

Rachel pulled her ankles into a tighter crisscross. 'I don't think he's seeing *through* me. At least … not yet.' She let that idea settle around us like a layer of swamp gas. 'Anyway, you're not getting rid of me. Python has made this personal.'

She glanced at me, and I couldn't escape the feeling that Python wasn't the one she really blamed. This had been personal for her ever since I'd accepted Rachel as my priestess. Ever since … well, ever since I'd been Apollo. If my trials as a mortal had done anything, they had shown me how many times I'd abandoned, forgotten and failed my Oracles over the centuries. I could not abandon Rachel in the same way. I'd neglected the basic truth that they did not serve me; I was supposed to serve *them* .

'We're lucky to have you,' I said. 'I only wish we had more time to figure out a plan.'

Rachel checked her watch – a basic wind-up model, which she'd probably chosen after seeing how easily technology went haywire around demigods, monsters and the other sorts of magical people she hung out with. 'It's

past lunchtime. You're supposed to surrender to Nero by nightfall. That doesn't give us much leeway.'

'Oh, lunchtime,' Meg said, staying reliably on-brand. 'Will, have you got anything besides Kit Kats? I'm starv–'

She jerked her hand away from Will's supply kit as if it had shocked her. 'Why is there a tail sticking out of your bag?'

Will furrowed his brow. 'Oh. Uh, yeah.' He pulled out what appeared to be a foot-long desiccated lizard wrapped in a handkerchief.

'Gross!' Meg said with enthusiasm. 'Is that for medicine or something?'

'Er, no,' Will said. 'You remember how Nico and I went hunting for a gift for the trogs? Well –'

'Ick.' Rachel scooted away. 'Why would they want *that*?'

Will glanced at me like *Please don't make me say it.*

I shuddered. 'The troglodytes … If the legends are true … they consider lizards a great, you know …' I mimed putting something in my mouth. 'Delicacy.'

Rachel hugged her stomach. 'Sorry I asked.'

'Cool,' said Meg. 'So, if we find the trogs, we give them the lizard and they'll help us?'

'I doubt it will be that simple,' I said. 'Meg, has anyone ever agreed to help you simply because you gave them a dead lizard?'

She pondered the question so long it made me wonder about her past gift-giving practices. 'I guess not?'

Will slipped the desiccated animal back in his bag. 'Well, this one is apparently rare and special. You don't want to know how difficult it was to find. Hopefully –'

Nico snorted and began to stir. 'Wh-what –?'

'It's okay,' Will reassured him. 'You're with friends.'

'Friends?' Nico sat up, bleary-eyed.

'Friends.' Will gave us a warning look, as if suggesting we shouldn't startle Nico with any sudden moves.

I gathered Nico was a grumpy napper like his father, Hades. Wake up Hades prematurely and you were likely to end up as a nuclear-blast shadow on his bedroom wall.

Nico rubbed his eyes and frowned at me. I tried to look harmless.

'Apollo,' he said. 'Right. I remember.'

'Good,' Will said. 'But you're still groggy. Have a Kit Kat.'

'Yes, doctor,' Nico muttered.

We waited while Nico refreshed himself with chocolate and a swig of nectar.

'Better.' He rose, still looking wobbly. 'Okay, everybody. I'm going to lead you into the troglodyte caverns. Keep your hands away from your weapons at all times. Let me go first and do the talking. The troglodytes can be a little … jumpy.'

'By *jumpy* ,' Will said, 'Nico means *likely to murder us with no provocation* .'

'That's what I said.' Nico popped the last of his Kit Kat in his mouth. 'Ready? Let's do this.'

Want directions to the troglodyte caverns? No problem!

First you go down. Then you go down some more. Then you take the next three downward turns. You'll see a path going slightly up. Ignore that. Keep going down until your eardrums implode. Then go down even more.

We crawled through pipes. We waded through slime pits. We navigated brick tunnels, stone tunnels and dirt tunnels that looked like they had been excavated by the earthworm chew-and-poop method. At one point, we crawled through a copper pipe so narrow I feared we'd end up popping out of Nero's personal toilet like a bunch of beauty queens emerging from a giant birthday cake.

I imagined myself singing 'Happy Birthday, Mr Emperor', then quickly tamped down the thought. The sewer gas must have been making me delirious.

After what seemed like hours of sewage-themed fun, we emerged in a circular room fashioned from panels of rough-hewn rock. In the centre, a massive stalagmite erupted from the floor and pierced the ceiling like the centre pole of a merry-go-round. (After surviving Tarquin's Tilden Park–carousel tomb, this was not a comparison I was pleased to make.)

'This is it,' Nico said.

He led us to the base of the stalagmite. An opening had been chipped away in the floor just big enough for someone to crawl through. Handholds had been carved into the side of the stalagmite, extending down into the darkness.

'Is this part of the Labyrinth?' I asked.

The place had a similar feel. The air coming from below was warm and somehow alive, like the breath of a sleeping leviathan. I had the sense that something was monitoring our progress – something intelligent and not necessarily friendly.

Nico shook his head. 'Please don't mention the Labyrinth. The trogs *detest* Daedalus's maze. They call it *shallow* . From here on down is all trog-built. We're deeper than the Labyrinth has ever gone.'

'Awesome,' Meg said.

'You can go ahead of me, then,' I said.

We followed Nico down the side of the stalagmite into a massive natural cavern. I couldn't see the edges, or even the bottom, but from the echoes I could tell it was bigger than my old temple at Didyma. (Not to brag about temple size, but that place was HUGE.)

The handholds were shallow and slippery, illuminated only by faintly glowing patches of lichen on the rock. It took all my concentration not to fall. I suspected the trogs had designed the entrance to their realm this way on purpose, so anyone foolish enough to invade would be forced to come down in single file – and might not make it to the bottom at all. The sounds of our breathing and our clinking

supplies reverberated through the cave. Any number of hostiles could have been watching us as we descended, taking aim with all sorts of delightful missile weapons.

Finally, we reached the floor. My legs ached. My fingers curled into arthritic claws.

Rachel squinted into the gloom. ‘What do we do now?’

‘You guys stay behind me,’ Nico said. ‘Will, can you do your thing? The barest minimum, please.’

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘What is Will’s “thing”?’

Will kept his focus on Nico. ‘Do I have to?’

‘We can’t use our weapons for light,’ Nico reminded him. ‘And we’ll need a little bit more, because the trogs don’t need any. I’d rather be able to see them.’

Will wrinkled his nose. ‘Fine.’ He set down his pack and stripped off his linen overshirt, leaving just his tank top.

I still had no idea what he was doing, though the girls didn’t seem to mind letting him do his *thing* . Did Will keep a concealed flashlight in his undershirt? Was he going to provide light by rubbing lichen on himself and smiling brilliantly?

Whatever the case, I wasn’t sure I *wanted* to see the trogs. I vaguely recalled a British Invasion band from the 1960s called the Troggs. I couldn’t shake the feeling that this subterranean race might all have mop-top hairdos and black turtlenecks and would use the word *groovy* a lot. I did not need that level of horror in my life.

Will took a deep breath. When he exhaled …

I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. We’d been in near-total darkness so long, I wasn’t sure why Will’s outline suddenly seemed clearer. I could see the texture of his jeans, the individual tufts of his hair, the blue of his eyes. His skin was glowing with a soft, warm golden light as if he’d ingested sunshine.

‘Whoa,’ Meg said.

Rachel’s eyebrows floated towards her hairline.

Nico smirked. ‘Friends, meet my glow-in-the-dark boyfriend.’

‘Could you not make a big deal about it?’ Will asked.

I was speechless. How could anyone *not* make a big deal about this? As far as demigod powers went, glowing in the dark was perhaps not as showy as skeleton-summoning or tomato-vine mastery, but it was still impressive. And, like Will’s skill at healing, it was gentle, useful and exactly what we needed in a pinch.

‘I’m so proud,’ I said.

Will’s face turned the colour of sunlight shining through a glass of cranberry juice. ‘Dad, I’m just *glowing* . I’m not graduating at the top of my class.’

‘I’ll be proud when you do that, too,’ I assured him.

‘Anyway.’ Nico’s lips quivered like he was trying not to giggle. ‘I’ll call the cavern-runners now. Everybody stay calm, okay?’

‘Why *are* they called cavern-runners?’ Rachel asked.

Nico held up his hand, indicating *Wait* or *You’re about to find out.*

He faced the darkness and shouted, ‘Troglodytes! I am Nico di Angelo, son of Hades! I have returned with four companions!’

Shuffling and clicking filled the cavern, as if Nico’s voice had dislodged a million bats. One moment, we were alone. The next moment, an army of troglodytes stood before us as if they’d materialized out of hyperspace. With unsettling certainty, I realized they had *run* here from wherever they’d been – yards away? miles away? – with speed that rivalled that of Hermes himself.

Nico’s warnings suddenly made sense to me. These creatures were so fast they could have killed us before we had time to draw a breath. If I’d had a weapon in hand, and if I’d raised it instinctively, accidentally … I would now be the grease spot formerly known as Lester formerly known as Apollo.

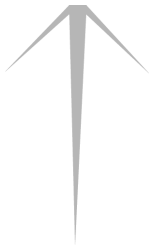
The troglodytes looked even stranger than the 1960s band that had appropriated their name. They were small humanoids, the tallest barely Meg's height, with vaguely froglike features: wide thin mouths, recessed noses and giant, brown, heavily lidded orbs for eyes. Their skin came in every shade from obsidian to chalk. Bits of stone and moss decorated their dark plaited hair. They wore a riot of clothing styles from modern jeans and T-shirts to 1920s business suits to Colonial-era frilly shirts and silk waistcoats.

The real showstopper, however, was their selection of hats, some piled three or four high on their heads: tricorns, bowlers, racing caps, top hats, hard hats, ski caps and baseball caps.

The trogs looked like a group of rowdy schoolchildren who'd been set loose in a costume store, told to try on whatever they wanted, and then allowed to crawl through the mud in their new outfits.

'We see you, Nico di Angelo!' said a trog in a miniature George Washington costume. His speech was interspersed with clicks, screeches and growls, so it actually sounded like '*CLICK.* We – *grr* – see you – *SCREEE* – Nico – *CLICK* – di Angelo – *grr* .'

George Washingtrog gave us a pointy-toothed grin. 'Are these the sacrifices you promised? The trogs are hungry!'



17

Speak to me of soup.
Let it be savoury broth
With a hint of skink.

MY LIFE DIDN'T FLASH BEFORE MY EYES, but I did find myself reviewing the past for anything I might have done to offend Nico di Angelo.

I imagined him saying *Yes, these are the sacrifices!* , then taking Will's hand and skipping away into the darkness while Rachel, Meg and I were devoured by an army of costumed, muddy miniature frogmen.

'These are not the sacrifices,' Nico said, allowing me to breathe again. 'But I have brought you a better offering! I see you, O great *Screech* -Bling!'

Nico did not say *screech* , mind you. He screeched in a way that told me he'd been practising Troglodytish. He had a lovely, ear-piercing accent.

The trogs leaned in, sniffing and waiting, while Nico held out his hand to Will, like *gimme.*

Will reached into his bag. He pulled out the desiccated lizard and handed it to Nico, who unwrapped it like a holy relic and held it aloft.

The crowd let out a collective gasp. 'Oooh!'

Screech-Bling's nostrils quivered. I thought his tricorn hat might pop off his head from excitement. 'Is that a – *GRR* – five-lined skink – *CLICK* ?'

'It is – *GRR* ,' Nico said. 'This was difficult to find, O *Screech* -Bling, Wearer of the Finest Hats.'

Screech-Bling licked his lips. He was drooling all over his cravat. 'A rare gift indeed. We often find Italian wall lizards in our domain. Turtles. Wood frogs. Rat snakes. Occasionally, if we are very lucky, a pit viper.'

'Tasty!' shrieked a trog in the back. 'Tasty pit vipers!'

Several other trogs screeched and growled in agreement.

'But a five-lined skink,' Screech-Bling said, 'is a delicacy we seldom see.'

'My gift to you,' Nico said. 'A peace offering in hope of friendship.'

Screech-Bling took the skink in his long-fingered, pointy-clawed hands. I assumed he would shove the reptile in his mouth and be done with it. That's what any king or god would do, presented with his favourite delicacy.

Instead, he turned to his people and made a short speech in their own language. The trogs cheered and waved their chapeaus. A trog in a mud-splattered chef's hat pushed his way to the front of the crowd. He knelt before Screech-Bling and accepted the skink.

The chieftain turned to us with a grin. 'We will share this bounty! I, *Screech* -Bling, chief executive – *CLICK* – officer of the troglodytes, have decreed that a great soup shall be made, so that all shareholders may taste of the wondrous skink!'

More cheering from the troglodytes. *Of course,* I realized. If Screech-Bling modelled himself after George Washington, he would not be a king – he would be a chief executive.

'For this great gift,' he continued, 'we will not kill and eat you, Nico di Angelo, even though you are Italian, and we wonder if you might taste as good as an Italian wall lizard!'

Nico bowed his head. ‘That is very kind.’

‘We will also generously refrain from eating your companions –’ a few of Screech-Bling’s shareholders muttered, ‘Aww, what?’ – ‘though it is true that, like you, they do not wear hats, and no hatless species can be considered civilized.’

Rachel and Meg looked alarmed, probably because Screech-Bling was still drooling profusely as he talked about not eating us. Or perhaps they were thinking about all the great hats they *could* have worn if they’d only known.

Glow-in-the-dark Will gave us a reassuring nod and mouthed, *It’s cool.* Apparently, the giving of a gift, followed by the promise of not killing and eating your guests, was standard troglodyte diplomatic protocol.

‘We see your generosity, O *Screech* -Bling!’ Nico said. ‘I would propose a pact between us – an agreement that would produce many hats for us all, as well as reptiles, fine clothing and rocks.’

An excited murmur rippled through the crowd. It seemed Nico had hit upon all four things on the troglodytes’ Christmas wish list.

Screech-Bling summoned forward a few senior trogs, who I guessed were his board of directors. One was the chef. The others wore the hats of a police officer, a firefighter and a cowboy. After a short consultation, Screech-Bling faced us with another pointy-toothed grin.

‘Very well!’ he said. ‘We will take you to our corporate headquarters, where we will feast upon skink soup and – *CLICK, GRR* – talk more about these matters!’

We were surrounded by a throng of cheering, growling shareholders. With a total lack of regard for personal space, as one might expect from a tunnel-dwelling species, they picked us up and ran with us on their shoulders, sweeping us out of the cavern and into a maze of tunnels at a speed that would’ve put the tauri silvestres to shame.

‘These guys are awesome,’ Meg decided. ‘They eat snakes.’

I knew several snakes, including Hermes’s companions, George and Martha, who would have been uncomfortable with Meg’s definition of awesomeness. Since we were now in the midst of the trogs’ encampment, I decided not to bring that up.

At first glance, the troglodytes’ corporate headquarters resembled an abandoned subway station. The wide platform was lined with columns holding up a barrelled ceiling of black tiles that drank in the dim light from pots of bioluminescent mushrooms scattered around the cavern. Along the left side of the platform, instead of a rail bed, was the sunken, packed-earth roadway that the trogs had used to bring us here. And at the speeds they ran, who needed a train?

Along the right side of the platform flowed a swift subterranean river. The trogs filled their gourds and cauldrons from this source, and also emptied their chamber pots into it – though being a civilized, hat-wearing people, they dumped the chamber pots downstream from where they drew their drinking water.

Unlike in a subway station, there were no obvious stairways leading up, no clearly marked exits. Just the river and the road we’d arrived on.

The platform buzzed with activity. Dozens of trogs rushed here and there, miraculously managing their daily chores without losing the stacks of hats on their heads. Some tended cooking pots on tripods over fire pits. Others – possibly merchants? – haggled over bins of rocks. Trog children, no bigger than human babies, frolicked around, playing catch with spheres of solid crystal.

Their dwellings were tents. Most had been appropriated from the human world, which gave me unpleasant flashbacks of the camping display at Macro’s Military Madness in Palm Springs. Others appeared to be of trog design, carefully stitched from the shaggy red hides of the

tauri silvestres. I had no idea how the trogs had managed to skin and stitch the impervious hides, but clearly, as the ancestral enemies of the forest bulls, they had found a way.

I wondered about that rivalry, too. How had a subterranean frog people in love with hats and lizards become mortal enemies to a breed of bright-red devil bulls? Perhaps at the beginning of time, the elder gods had told the first trogs, *You may now pick your nemesis!* And the first trogs had pointed across the newly made fields of creation and yelled, *We hate those cows!*

Whatever the case, I was comforted to know that even if the trogs were not yet our friends, at least we had a mutual enemy.

Screech-Bling had given us a guest tent and a cold fire pit and told us to make ourselves at home while he saw to dinner preparations. Or, rather, he'd told *Nico* to make himself at home. The CEO kept eyeing Rachel, Meg and me like we were sides of beef hanging in a shop window. As for Will, the troglodytes seemed to ignore him. My best guess: because Will glowed, they considered him simply a movable light source, as if Nico had brought along his own pot of luminous mushrooms. Judging from Will's scowl, he did not appreciate this.

It would've been easier to relax if Rachel hadn't kept checking her watch – reminding us that it was now four in the afternoon, then four thirty, and that Meg and I were supposed to surrender by sundown. I could only hope the troglodytes were like senior citizens and ate supper early.

Meg busied herself collecting spores from the nearby mushroom pots, which she seemed to consider the coolest thing since snake-eating. Will and Nico sat on the other side of the fire pit having a tense discussion. I couldn't hear the words, but from their facial expressions and hand gestures, I got the gist:

Will: *Worry, worry, worry.*

Nico: *Calm down, probably won't die.*

Will: *Worry. Trogs. Dangerous. Yikes.*

Nico: *Trogs good. Nice hats.*

Or something along those lines.

After a while, the trog with the chef's hat materialized at our campsite. In his hand was a steaming ladle. '*Screech* - Bling will talk to you now,' he said in heavily Troglodytish-laced English.

We all began to rise, but the chef stopped us with a sweep of his ladle. 'Only Nico, the Italian wall lizard – um, *SQUEAK* – I mean the Italian son of Hades. The rest of you will wait here until dinner.'

His gleaming eyes seemed to add, *When you may or may not be on the menu!*

Nico squeezed Will's hand. 'It'll be fine. Back soon.'

Then he and the chef were gone. In exasperation, Will threw himself down on his fireside mat and put his backpack over his face, reducing our Will-glow illumination by about fifty percent.

Rachel scanned the encampment, her eyes glittering in the gloom.

I wondered what she saw with her ultra-clear vision. Perhaps the troglodytes looked even scarier than I realized. Perhaps their hats were even more magnificent. Whatever the case, her shoulders curved as tense as a drawn bow. Her fingers traced the soot-stained floor as if she were itching for her paintbrushes.

'When you surrender to Nero,' she told me, 'the first thing you'll need to do is buy us time.'

Her tone disturbed me almost as much as her words: *when* I surrendered, not *if* . Rachel had accepted that it was the only way. The reality of my predicament curled up and nestled in my throat like a five-lined skink.

I nodded. 'B-buy time. Yes.'

'Nero will want to burn down New York as soon as he has you,' she said. 'Why would he wait? Unless you give him a reason …'

I had a feeling I would not like Rachel's next suggestion. I didn't have a clear understanding of what Nero intended to do to me once I surrendered – other than the obvious torture and death. Luguselwa seemed to believe the emperor would keep Meg and me alive at least for a while, though she had been vague about what she knew of Nero's plans.

Commodus had wanted to make a public spectacle out of my death. Caligula had wanted to extract what remained of my godhood and add it to his own power with the help of Medea's sorcery. Nero might have similar ideas. Or – and I feared this was most likely – once he finished torturing me, he might surrender me to Python to seal their alliance. No doubt my old reptilian enemy would enjoy swallowing me whole, letting me die in his belly over the course of many excruciating days of digestion. So, there was *that* to look forward to.

'Wh-what reason would make Nero wait?' I asked.

Apparently, I was picking up Troglodytish, because my voice was punctuated by clicks and squeaks.

Rachel traced curlicues in the soot – waves, perhaps, or a line of people's heads. 'You said Camp Half-Blood was standing by to help?'

'Yes … Kayla and Austin told me they would remain on alert. Chiron should be back at camp soon as well. But an attack on Nero's tower would be doomed. The whole point of our surrender –'

'Is to distract the emperor from what Nico, Will and I will be doing, hopefully, with the trogs' help: disabling the Greek-fire vats. But you'll need to give Nero another incentive to keep him from pushing that button the minute you surrender. Otherwise we'll never have time to sabotage his doomsday weapon, no matter *how* fast the trogs can run or dig.'

I understood what she was suggesting. The five-lined skink of reality began its slow, painful slide down my

oesophagus.

'You want to alert Camp Half-Blood,' I said. 'Have them initiate an attack anyway. Despite the risks.'

'I don't *want* any of this,' she said. 'But it's the only way. It'll have to be carefully timed. You and Meg surrender. We get to work with the troglodytes. Camp Half-Blood musters for an attack. But if Nero thinks the entire camp is coming to him –'

'That would be worth waiting for. To take out the entire population of Camp Half-Blood while he destroys the city, all in one terrible firestorm.' I swallowed. 'I could just bluff. I could *claim* reinforcements are coming.'

'No,' Rachel said. 'It has to be real. Nero has Python on his side. Python would *know* .'

I didn't bother asking her how. The monster might not have been able to see through Rachel's eyes yet, but I remembered all too well how his voice had sounded speaking through her mouth. They were connected. And that connection was getting stronger.

I was reluctant to consider the details of such an insane plan, but I found myself asking, 'How would you alert the camp?'

Rachel gave me a thin smile. '*I* can use cell phones. I don't normally carry one, but I'm not a demigod. Assuming I make it back to the surface, where cell phones actually, you know, *work* , I can buy a cheap one. Chiron has a crappy old computer in the Big House. He hardly ever uses it, but he knows to look for messages or emails in emergency situations. I'm pretty sure I can get his attention. Assuming he's there.'

She sounded so calm, which just made me feel more agitated.

'Rachel, I'm scared,' I admitted. 'It was one thing thinking about putting myself in danger. But the entire camp? Everyone?'

Strangely, this comment seemed to please her.

She took my hand. ‘I know, Apollo. And the fact that you’re worried about other people? That’s beautiful. But you’ll have to trust me. That secret path to the throne … the thing I am supposed to show you? I’m pretty sure this is it. This is how we make things right.’

Make things right.

What would such an ending even *look* like?

Six months ago, when I first plummeted to Manhattan, the answer had seemed obvious. I would return to Mount Olympus, my immortality restored, and everything would be great. After being Lester for a few more months, I might have added that destroying the Triumvirate and freeing the ancient Oracles would also be good … but mostly because that was the path back to my godhood. Now, after all the sacrifices I had seen, the pain suffered by so many … what could possibly make things right?

No amount of success would bring back Jason, or Dakota, or Don, or Crest, or Money Maker, or Heloise, or the many other heroes who had fallen. We could not undo those tragedies.

Mortals and gods had one thing in common: we were notoriously nostalgic for ‘the good old days’. We were always looking back to some magical golden time before everything went bad. I remembered sitting with Socrates, back around 425 BCE , and us griping to each other about how the younger generations were ruining civilization.

As an immortal, of course, I should have known that there never were any ‘good old days’. The problems humans face never really change, because mortals bring their own baggage with them. The same is true of gods.

I wanted to go back to a time before all the sacrifices had been made. Before I had experienced so much pain. But making things right could *not* mean rewinding the clock. Even Kronos hadn’t had *that* much power over time.

I suspected that wasn’t what Jason Grace would want, either.

When he'd told me to remember being human, he'd meant *building* on pain and tragedy, overcoming it, learning from it. That was something gods never did. We just complained.

To be human is to move forward, to adapt, to believe in your ability to make things better. That is the only way to make the pain and sacrifice mean something.

I met Rachel's gaze. 'I trust you. I'll make things right. Or I will die trying.'

The strange thing was, I meant it. A world in which the future was controlled by a giant reptile, where hope was suffocated, where heroes sacrificed their lives for nothing, and pain and hardship could not yield a better life … that seemed much worse than a world without Apollo.

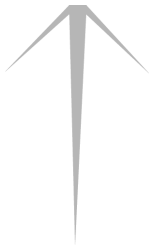
Rachel kissed my cheek – a sisterly gesture, except it was hard to imagine my actual sister Artemis doing that.

'I'm proud of you,' Rachel said. 'Whatever happens. Remember that.'

I was tongue-tied.

Meg turned towards us, her hands full of lichen and mushrooms. 'Rachel, did you just kiss him? Ew. Why?'

Before Rachel could answer, the chef reappeared at our campsite, his apron and hat splattered with steaming broth. He still had that hungry glint in his eyes. 'VISITORS – *SQUEAK* – come with me! We are ready for the feast!'



18

Our special tonight:
A lovely braised
Apollo Under a Mets hat

MY ADVICE: IF YOU'RE EVER GIVEN A CHOICE between drinking skink soup or serving yourself up as the troglodytes' main course, just flip a coin. Neither option is survivable.

We sat on cushions around a communal mushroom pit with a hundred or so troglodytes. As barbarian guests, we were each given headwear, so as not to offend our hosts' sensibilities. Meg wore a beekeeper's hat. Rachel got a pith helmet. I was given a New York Mets cap because, I was told, no one else wanted it. I found this insulting both to me and the franchise.

Nico and Will sat on Screech-Bling's right. Nico sported a top hat, which worked well with his black-and-white aesthetic. Will, my poor boy, had been given a lampshade. No respect for the light-bringers of the world.

Sitting to my left was the chef, who introduced himself as Click-Wrong (pronounce the *W*). His name made me wonder if he'd been an impulse buy for his parents on Cyber Monday, but I thought it would be rude to enquire.

The trog children had the job of serving. A tiny boy in a propeller beanie offered me a black stone cup filled to the brim, then ran away giggling. The soup bubbled a rich golden brown.

'The secret is lots of turmeric,' Click-Wrong confided.

'Ah.' I raised my cup, as everyone else was doing. The trogs began slurping with blissful expressions and many *clicks* , *grrs* and yummy sounds.

The smell was not bad: like tangy chicken broth. Then I spotted a lizard foot floating in the foam, and I just couldn't.

I pressed my lips to the rim and pretended to sip. I waited for what I thought was a credible amount of time, allowing most of the trogs to finish their portions.

'Mmm!' I said. '*Click* -Wrong, your culinary skills astound me! Partaking in this soup is a great honour. In fact, having any more of it would be *too* much of an honour. May I give the rest to someone who can better appreciate the succulent flavours?'

'Me!' shouted a nearby trog.

'Me!' shouted another.

I passed the cup down the circle, where it was soon drained by happy troglodytes.

Click-Wrong did not appear insulted. He patted my shoulder sympathetically. 'I remember my first skink. It is a potent soup! You will be able to handle more next time.'

I was glad to hear he thought there would *be* a next time. It implied we would not be killed *this* time. Rachel, looking relieved, announced that she, too, was overwhelmed with honour and would be happy to share her portion.

I looked at Meg's bowl, which was already empty. 'Did you actually –?'

'What?' Her expression was unreadable behind the netting of her beekeeper's hat.

'Nothing.'

My stomach convulsed with a combination of nausea and hunger. I wondered if we would be honoured with a second course. Perhaps some breadsticks. Or really anything that wasn't garnished with skink feet.

Screech-Bling raised his hands and *click-click-click* ed for attention. 'Friends! Shareholders! I see you all!'

The troglodytes tapped their spoons against their stone cups, making a sound like a thousand clattering bones.

'Out of courtesy for our uncivilized guests,' Screech-Bling continued, 'I shall speak in the barbaric language of the crust-dwellers.'

Nico tipped his fine top hat. 'I see the honour you give us. Thank you, CEO *Screech* -Bling, for not eating us, and also speaking in our tongue.'

Screech-Bling nodded with a smug expression that said, *No problem, kid. We're just awesome that way.* 'The Italian wall lizard has told us many things!'

A board member standing behind him, the one with the cowboy hat, whispered in his ear.

'I mean the Italian son of Hades!' Screech-Bling corrected. 'He has explained the evil plans of Emperor Nero!'

The trogs muttered and hissed. Apparently, Nero's infamy had spread even to the deepest-dwelling corporations of hat-wearers. Screech-Bling pronounced the name *Nee-*ACK-*row* , with a sound in the middle like a cat being strangled, which seemed appropriate.

'The son of Hades wishes our help!' said Screech-Bling. 'The emperor has vats of fire-liquid. Many of you know the ones I speak of. Loud and clumsy was the digging when they installed those vats. Shoddy the workmanship!'

'Shoddy!' agreed many of the trogs.

'Soon,' said the CEO, 'Nee-*ACK* -row will unleash burning death across the Crusty Crust. The son of Hades has asked our help to dig to these vats and eat them!'

'You mean disable them?' Nico suggested.

‘Yes, that!’ Screech-Bling agreed. ‘Your language is crude and difficult!’

On the opposite side of the circle, the board member with the police hat made a small *notice-me* sort of growl. ‘O *Screech* -Bling, these fires will not reach us. We are too deep! Should we not let the Crusty Crust burn?’

‘Hey!’ Will spoke for the first time, looking about as serious as someone can while wearing a lampshade. ‘We’re talking about millions of innocent lives.’

Police Hat snarled. ‘We trogs are only hundreds. We do not breed and breed and choke the world with our waste. Our lives are rare and precious. You crust-dwellers? No. Besides, you are blind to our existence. You would not help us.’

‘*Grr* -Fred speaks the truth,’ said Cowboy Hat. ‘No offence to our guests.’

The child with the propeller beanie chose this moment to appear at my side, grinning and offering me a wicker basket covered by a napkin. ‘Breadsticks?’

I was so upset I declined.

‘– assure our guests,’ Screech-Bling was saying. ‘We have welcomed you to our table. We see you as intelligent beings. You must not think we are against your kind. We bear you no ill will! We simply do not care whether you live or die.’

There was a general muttering of agreement. Click-Wrong gave me a kindly glance that implied, *You can’t argue with that logic!*

The scary thing was, back when I was a god, I might have agreed with the trogs. I’d destroyed a few cities myself in the old days. Humans always popped up again like weeds. Why fret about one little fiery apocalypse in New York?

Now, though, one of those ‘not-so-rare’ lives was Estelle Blofis’s, giggler and future ruler of the Crusty Crust. And her parents, Sally and Paul … In fact, there wasn’t a single mortal I considered expendable. Not *one* deserved to be

snuffed out by Nero's cruelty. The revelation stunned me. I had become a human-life hoarder!

'It's not just crust-dwellers,' Nico was saying, his tone remarkably calm. 'Lizards, skinks, frogs, snakes … Your food supply will burn.'

This caused some uneasy mumbling, but I sensed that the trogs were still not swayed. They might have to range as far as New Jersey or Long Island to gather their reptiles. They might have to live on breadsticks for a while. But so what? The threat wasn't critical to their lives or their stock prices.

'What about hats?' Will asked. 'How many haberdasheries will burn if we don't stop Nero? Dead haberdashers cannot make trog haberdashery.'

More grumbling, but clearly this argument wasn't enough, either.

With a growing sense of helplessness, I realized that we wouldn't be able to convince the troglodytes by appealing to their self-interest. If only a few hundred of them existed, why should they gamble their own lives by tunnelling into Nero's doomsday reservoir? No god or corporation would accept that level of risk.

Before I realized what I was doing, I had risen to my feet. 'Stop! Hear me, troglodytes!'

The crowd grew dangerously still. Hundreds of large brown eyes fixed on me.

One trog whispered, 'Who is that?'

His companion whispered back, 'Don't know, but he can't be important. He's wearing a Mets hat.'

Nico gave me an urgent *sit-down-before-you-get-us-killed* look.

'Friends,' I said, 'this is not about reptiles and hats.'

The trogs gasped. I had just implied that two of their favourite things were no more important than crust-dweller lives.

I forged ahead. ‘The trogs are civilized! But what makes a people civilized?’

‘Hats!’ yelled one.

‘Language!’ yelled another.

‘Soup?’ enquired a third.

‘You can *see* ,’ I said. ‘That is how you greeted us. You *saw* the son of Hades. And I don’t mean just seeing with your eyes. You see value, and honour, and worthiness. You see things as they are. Is this not true?’

The trogs nodded reluctantly, confirming that, yes, in terms of importance, seeing was probably up there with reptiles and hats.

‘You’re right about the crust-dwellers being blind,’ I admitted. ‘In many ways, they are. So was I, for centuries.’

‘Centuries?’ Click-Wrong leaned away as if realizing I was well past my expiration date. ‘Who are you?’

‘I was Apollo,’ I said. ‘God of the sun. Now I am a mortal named Lester.’

No one seemed awed or incredulous – just confused. Someone whispered to a friend, ‘What’s a sun?’ Another asked, ‘What’s a Lester?’

‘I thought I knew all the races of the world,’ I continued, ‘but I didn’t believe troglodytes existed until Nico brought me here. I see your importance now! Like you, I once thought crust-dwellers’ lives were common and unimportant. I have learned otherwise. I would like to help you see them as I have. Their value has nothing to do with hats.’

Screech-Bling narrowed his large brown eyes. ‘Nothing to do with hats?’

‘If I may?’ As nonthreateningly as I could, I brought out my ukulele.

Nico’s expression changed from urgency to despair, like I had signed our death warrants. I was used to such silent criticism from his father. Hades has *zero* appreciation for the fine arts.

I strummed a C major chord. The sound reverberated through the cavern like tonal thunder. Trogs covered their ears. Their jaws dropped. They stared in wonder as I began to sing.

As I had at Camp Jupiter, I made up the words as I went along. I sang of my trials, my travels with Meg and all the heroes who had helped us along the way. I sang of sacrifices and triumphs. I sang of Jason, our fallen shareholder, with honesty and heartache, though I may have embellished the number of fine hats he wore. I sang of the challenges we now faced – Nero's ultimatum for my surrender, the fiery death he had in mind for New York, and the even greater menace of Python, waiting in the caverns of Delphi, hoping to strangle the future itself.

The trogs listened with rapt attention. No one so much as crunched a breadstick. If our hosts had any inkling that I was recycling the melody from Hall and Oates's 'Kiss on My List', they gave no indication. (What can I tell you? Under pressure, I sometimes default to Hall and Oates.)

When the last chord ceased echoing through the cavern, no one moved.

Finally, Screech-Bling wiped tears from his eyes. 'That sound … was the most – *GRR* – horrible thing I have ever heard. Were the words true?'

'They were.' I decided perhaps the CEO had confused *horrible* with *wonderful* , the same way he'd confused *eat* with *disable* . 'I know this because my friend here, Rachel Elizabeth Dare, *sees* it. She is a prophetess and has the gift of clear sight.'

Rachel waved, her expression hidden under the shadow of her pith helmet. 'If Nero isn't stopped,' she said, 'he won't just take over the wor– the Crusty Crust. Eventually he will come for the trogs, too, and every other hat-wearing people. Python will do worse. He will take away the future from all of us. *Nothing* will happen unless he decrees it. Imagine your destiny controlled by a giant reptile.'

This last comment hit the crowd like a blast of Arctic air. Mothers hugged their children. Children hugged their breadstick baskets. Stacks of hats trembled on every troglodyte head. I supposed the trogs, being eaters of reptiles, could well imagine what a giant reptile might do to them.

'But that is not why you should help us,' I added. 'Not just because it is good for trogs, but because we must all help one another. That is the only way to be civilized. We … We must see the right way, and we must take it.'

Nico closed his eyes, as if saying his final prayers. Will glowed quietly under his lampshade. Meg gave me a stealthy thumbs-up, which I did not find encouraging.

The trogs waited for Screech-Bling to make his decision as to whether or not we would be added to the dinner menu.

I felt strangely calm. I was convinced we'd made our best case. I had appealed to their altruism. Rachel had appealed to their fear of a giant reptile eating the future. Who could say which argument was stronger?

Screech-Bling studied me and my New York Mets hat. 'What would you have me do, Lester-Apollo?'

He used *Lester* the same way he used screeches or clicks before other names, almost like a title – as if showing me respect.

'Could you dig under the emperor's tower undetected?' I asked. 'Allowing my friends to disable the vats of Greek fire?'

He nodded curtly. 'It could be done.'

'Then I would ask you to take Will and Nico –'

Rachel coughed.

'And Rachel,' I added, hoping I was not sentencing my favourite priestess to die in a pith helmet. 'Meanwhile, Meg and I must go to the emperor's front door so we can surrender.'

The trogs shifted uneasily. Either they did not like what I said, or the skink soup had started to reach their intestines.

Grr-Fred glared at me from under his police hat. ‘I still do not trust you. Why would you surrender to Nero?’

‘I see you, O *Grr* -Fred,’ Nico said, ‘Mighty of Hats, Corporate Security Chief! You are right to be wary, but Apollo’s surrender is a distraction, a trick. He will keep the emperor’s eyes away from us while we tunnel. If we can fool the emperor into letting down his guard …’

His voice trailed off. He looked at the ceiling as if he’d heard something far above.

A heartbeat later, the trogs stirred. They shot to their feet, overturning soup bowls and breadbaskets. Many grabbed obsidian knives and spears.

Screech-Bling snarled at Nico. ‘Tauri silvestres approach! What have you done, son of Hades?’

Nico looked dumbfounded. ‘Nothing! W-we fought a herd on the surface. But we shadow-travelled away. There’s no chance they could’ve –’

‘Foolish crust-dwellers!’ howled Grr-Fred. ‘Tauri silvestres can track their prey anywhere! You have brought our enemies to our headquarters. *Creak* -Morris, take charge of the tunnel-lings! Get them to safety!’

Creak-Morris began gathering up the children. Other adults started pulling down tents, collecting their best rocks, hats and other supplies.

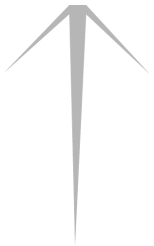
‘It is well for you we are the fastest runners in existence,’ snarled Click-Wrong, his chef’s hat quivering with rage. ‘You have endangered us all!’ He hefted his empty soup cauldron, jumped onto the roadway and vanished in a skink-scented *whoosh* .

‘What of the crust-dwellers?’ Grr-Fred asked his CEO. ‘Do we kill them or leave them for the bulls?’

Screech-Bling glowered at me. ‘*Grr* -Fred, take Lester-Apollo and Meg-Girl to the Tower of Nero. If they wish to

surrender, we will not stop them. As for these other three, I will –’

The platform shook, the ceiling cracked, and cows rained down on the encampment.



19

Flow on, River Ouch!
Take me – ouch! – away from – ouch!
Blessed River – ouch!

THE NEXT FIVE MINUTES WEREN'T JUST chaotic. They were what Chaos is like when Chaos wants to let her hair down and go nuts. And, believe me, you *never* want to see a primordial goddess go nuts.

Tauri silvestres dropped from cracks in the ceiling – crashing into tents, flattening troglodytes, scattering hats and soup bowls and pots of mushrooms. Almost immediately, I lost track of Will, Rachel and Nico in the pandemonium. I could only hope Screech-Bling and his lieutenants had whisked them to safety.

A bull landed in a heap right in front of me, separating me from Meg and Grr-Fred. As the beast scrambled to gain its footing (hoofing?), I parkoured over it, desperate not to lose my young master.

I spotted her – now ten feet away, Grr-Fred rapidly dragging her towards the river for reasons unknown. The close quarters and obstacles on the platform seemed to hamper the trogs' natural running skills, but Grr-Fred was still moving at a fast clip. If Meg hadn't kept tripping as

they wove through the destruction, I would've stood no chance of catching up.

I leaped over a second bull. (Hey, if the cow could jump over the moon, I didn't see why the sun couldn't jump over two cows.) Another barrelled blindly past me, lowing in panic as it tried to shake a bull-hide tent off its horns. To be fair, I would've panicked too if I'd had the skin of one of my own kind wrapped around my head.

I'd almost reached Meg when I spotted a crisis unfolding across the platform. The little trog with the propeller beanie, my server during dinner, had got separated from the other children. Oblivious to danger, he was now stumbling after his ball of crystal as it rolled across the platform, straight into the path of a charging bull.

I reached for my bow, then remembered my quivers were exhausted. With a curse, I snatched up the nearest thing I could find – an obsidian dagger – and spun it towards the bull's head.

'HEY!' I shouted.

This accomplished two things: it stopped the trog in his tracks, and it caused the bull to face me just in time to get a dagger in its nostril.

'Moo!' said the bull.

'My ball!' shouted Beanie Boy as his crystal sphere rolled between the bull's legs, heading in my direction.

'I'll get it back to you!' I said, which seemed like a silly thing to promise, given the circumstances. 'Run! Get to safety!'

With one last forlorn glance at his crystal ball, Beanie Boy leaped off the platform and disappeared down the road.

The bull blew the dagger out of its nose. It glared at me, its blue eyes as bright and hot as butane flames in the gloom of the cavern. Then it charged.

Like the heroes of old, I stepped back, stumbled on a cooking pot and fell hard on my butt. Just before the bull

could trample me into Apollo-flavoured marmalade, glowing mushrooms erupted all over its head. The bull, blinded, screamed and veered off into the bedlam.

'Come on!' Meg stood a few feet away, having somehow convinced Grr-Fred to double back. 'Lester, we've got to go!' She said this as if the idea might not have occurred to me.

I snatched up Beanie Boy's crystal ball, struggled to my feet and followed Grr-Fred and Meg to the edge of the river.

'Jump in!' ordered Grr-Fred.

'But there's a perfectly good road!' I fumbled to secure the crystal ball in my pack. 'And you dump your chamber pots in that water!'

'Tauri can follow us on the road,' shouted Grr-Fred. 'You don't run fast enough.'

'Can they swim?' I asked.

'Yes, but not as quickly as they run! Now, jump or die!'

I liked a good simple choice. I grabbed Meg's hand. Together we jumped.

Ah, subterranean rivers. So cold. So fast. So very full of rocks.

You'd think all those jagged, spearlike stones in the water would have been eroded over time by the swift current, but no. They clubbed and clawed and stabbed me relentlessly as I sped by. We hurtled through darkness, spinning and somersaulting at the mercy of the river, my head going under and coming back out at random intervals. Somehow, I always picked the wrong moment to try breathing. Despite it all, I kept my grip on Meg's hand.

I have no idea how long this water torture lasted. It seemed longer than most centuries I'd lived through – except perhaps the fourteenth CE , a horrible time to be alive. I was starting to wonder whether I would die of hypothermia, drowning or blunt-force trauma when Meg's grip tightened on mine. My arm was nearly wrenched out

of its socket when we lurched to a stop. Some superhuman force hauled me out of the river like a dugong in a fishing net.

I landed on a slick stone ledge. I curled up, spluttering, shivering, miserable. I was dimly aware of Meg coughing and retching next to me. Someone's pointy-toed shoe kicked me between the shoulder blades.

'Get up, get up!' Grr-Fred said. 'No time to nap!'

I groaned. 'Is this what naps look like on your planet?'

He loomed over me, his police hat miraculously intact, his fists planted on his hips. It occurred to me that *he* must have pulled us out of the river when he spotted this ledge, but that seemed impossible. Grr-Fred must have had to have enough body strength to bench-press a washing machine.

'The forest bulls can swim!' he reminded me. 'We must be gone before they can sniff out this ledge. Here.'

He handed me a piece of jerky. At least it smelled like it *had* been jerky before our dip in the River Ouch. Now it looked more like deli-sliced sea sponge.

'Eat it,' he ordered.

He handed a piece to Meg as well. Her beekeeper's hat had been swept away in the flood, leaving her with a hairdo that looked like a dead wet badger. Her glasses were cockeyed. She had a few scrapes on her arms. Some of her seed packages had exploded in her gardening belt, giving her a bumper crop of acorn squash around her waist. But otherwise she looked well enough. She shoved the jerky in her mouth and chewed.

'Good,' she pronounced, which didn't surprise me from a girl who drank skink soup.

Grr-Fred glared at me until I relented and tried a bite of jerky, too. It was not good. It was, however, bland and edible. As the first bite went down my throat, warmth coursed through my limbs. My blood hummed. My ears

popped. I swore I could feel the acne clearing up on my cheeks.

'Wow,' I said. 'Do you sell this stuff?'

'Let me work,' growled our guide. 'Wasted too much time already.'

He turned and examined the wall of the tunnel.

As my vision cleared and my teeth stopped chattering quite so violently, I took stock of our sanctuary. At our feet, the river continued to roar, fierce and loud. Downstream, the channel shrank until there was no headroom at all – meaning Grr-Fred had pulled us to safety just in time if we wanted to keep breathing. Our ledge was wide enough for us all to sit on, barely, but the ceiling was so low even Grr-Fred had to stoop a little.

Other than the river, I saw no way out – just the blank rock wall Grr-Fred was staring at.

'Is there a secret passage?' I asked him.

He scowled like I was not worth the strip of sponge jerky he'd given me. 'No passage *yet* , crust-dweller.'

He cracked his knuckles, wriggled his fingers and began to dig. Under his bare hands, the rock crumbled into lightweight chunks like meringue, which Grr-Fred scooped away and tossed in the river. Within minutes, he had cleared twenty cubic feet of stone as easily as a mortal might pull clothes from a closet. And he kept digging.

I picked up a piece of debris, wondering if it was still brittle. I squeezed it and promptly cut my finger.

Meg pointed to my half-eaten jerky. 'You going to finish that?'

I'd been planning to save the jerky for later – in case I got hungry, required extra strength or got a bad attack of pimples – but Meg looked so ravenous I handed it over.

I spent the next few minutes emptying the water from my ukulele, my quivers and my shoes as Grr-Fred continued to dig.

At last, a cloud of dust billowed from his excavation hole. The trog grunted with satisfaction. He stepped out, revealing a passage now five feet deep, opening into a different cavern.

'Hurry,' he said. 'I will seal the tunnel behind us. If we are lucky, that will be enough to throw the tauri off our scent for a while.'

Our luck held. Enjoy that sentence, dear reader, because I don't get to use it often. As we picked our way through the next cavern, I kept glancing back at the wall Grr-Fred had sealed, waiting for a herd of wet evil red cows to bust through, but none did.

Grr-Fred led us upward through a winding maze of tunnels until at last we emerged in a brickwork corridor where the air smelled much worse, like city sewage.

Grr-Fred sniffed in disapproval. 'Human territory.'

I was so relieved I could have hugged a sewer rat. 'Which way to daylight?'

Grr-Fred bared his teeth. 'Do not use that language with me.'

'What language? Day–?'

He hissed. 'If you were a tunnel-ling, I would wash your mouth out with basalt!'

Meg smirked. 'I'd kinda like to see that.'

'Hmph,' said Grr-Fred. 'This way.'

He led us onward into the dark.

I had lost track of time, but I could imagine Rachel Elizabeth Dare tapping her watch, reminding me I was late, late, late. I could only hope we would reach Nero's tower before sundown.

Just as fervently, I hoped Nico, Will and Rachel had survived the bulls' attack. Our friends were resourceful and brave, yes. Hopefully, they still had the assistance of the troglodytes. But, too often, survival depended on sheer

luck. This was something we gods didn't like to advertise, as it cut down on donations at our temples.

'Grr-Fred –?' I started to ask.

'It's *Grr* -Fred,' he corrected.

'GRR-Fred?'

'*Grr* -Fred.'

'gRR-Fred?'

'*Grr* -Fred!'

You would think, with my musical skills, I would be better at picking up the nuances of languages, but apparently I did not have Nico's panache for Troglodytish.

'Honoured guide,' I said, 'what of our friends? Do you believe *Screech* -Bling will keep his promise and help them dig to the emperor's fire vats?'

Grr-Fred sneered. 'Did the CEO make such a promise? I did not hear that.'

'But –'

'We have arrived.' He stopped at the end of the corridor, where a narrow brick stairwell led upward. 'This is as far as I can go. These steps will take you into one of the humans' subway stations. From there, you can find your way to the Crusty Crust. You will surface within fifty feet of Nero's tower.'

I blinked. 'How can you be sure?'

'I am a trog,' he said, as if explaining something to a particularly slow tunnel-ling.

Meg bowed, making her acorn squash knock together. 'Thank you, *Grr* -Fred.'

He nodded gruffly. I noticed he didn't correct *her* pronunciation.

'I have done my duty,' he said. 'What happens to your friends is up to *Screech* -Bling, assuming the CEO is even alive after the destruction you hatless barbarians brought to our headquarters. If it were up to me …'

He didn't bother finishing the thought. I gathered Grr-Fred would *not* be voting in favour of offering us stock

options at the next troglodyte shareholders' meeting.

From my soggy backpack, I fished out Beanie Boy's crystal ball and offered it to Grr-Fred. 'Please, would you take this back to its owner? And thank you for guiding us. For what it is worth, I meant what I said. We have to help one another. That's the only future worth fighting for.'

Grr-Fred turned the crystal sphere in his fingers. His brown eyes were inscrutable as cavern walls. They might have been hard and unmovable, or about to turn to meringue, or on the verge of being broken through by angry cows.

'Good digging,' he said at last. Then he was gone.

Meg peered up the stairwell. Her hands trembled, and I didn't think it was from the cold.

'Are you sure about this?' I asked.

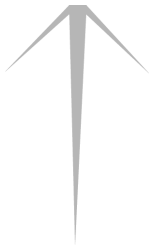
She started, as if she'd forgotten I was there. 'Like you said, either we help each other, or we let a snake eat the future.'

'That's not exactly what I –'

'Come on, Lester.' She took a deep breath. 'Let's get going.'

Phrased as an order, it wasn't something I could have refused, but I got the feeling Meg was saying it to steel her own resolve as much as mine.

Together we climbed back towards the Crusty Crust.



20

Have you had your lunch?
This part is not good to read
If you've just eaten.

I EXPECTED A MOAT FILLED WITH ALLIGATORS . A wrought-iron portcullis. Possibly some vats of boiling oil.

In my mind, I'd built up the Tower of Nero as a fortress of darkness with all the evil trimmings. Instead, it was a glass-and-steel monstrosity of the ordinary Midtown variety.

Meg and I had surfaced from the subway about an hour before sunset. Luxuriously early, by our standards. Now we stood across Seventh Avenue from the tower, observing and gathering our nerve.

The scene on the sidewalk out front could've been anywhere in Manhattan. Annoyed New Yorkers jostled past groups of gawping tourists. Kebab-scented steam wafted from a halal food cart. Funk music blared from a Mister Softee ice-cream truck. A street artist hawked airbrushed celebrity paintings. No one paid any special attention to the corporate-looking building that housed Triumvirate Holdings Ltd and the doomsday button that would destroy the city in approximately fifty-eight minutes.

From across the street, I spotted no armed guards, no monsters or Germani on patrol – just black marble pillars flanking a plate-glass entrance, and, inside, a typical oversize lobby with abstract art on the walls, a manned security desk and glass turnstiles protecting access to the elevator banks.

It was after 7:00 p.m., but employees were still leaving the building in small clusters. Folks in business suits clutched briefcases and phones as they hurried to catch their trains. Some exchanged pleasantries with the security guy on their way out. I tried to imagine those conversations. *Bye, Caleb. Say hi to the family. See you tomorrow for another day of evil business transactions!*

Suddenly, I felt as if we'd come all this way to surrender to a brokerage firm.

Meg and I crossed at the pedestrian crossing. Gods forbid we jaywalk and get hit by a car on our way to a painful death. We attracted some strange looks from other pedestrians, which was fair since we were still dripping wet and smelled like a troglodyte's armpit. Nevertheless, this being New York, most people ignored us.

Meg and I didn't speak as we climbed the front steps. By silent agreement, we gripped each other's hands as if another river might sweep us away.

No alarms went off. No guards jumped out of hiding. No bear traps were triggered. We pushed open the heavy glass doors and walked into the lobby.

Light classical music wafted through the chilly air. Above the security desk hung a metal sculpture with slowly swirling primary-coloured shapes. The guard bent forward in his chair, reading a paperback, his face pale blue in the light of his desktop monitors.

'Help you?' he said without looking up.

I glanced at Meg, silently double-checking that we were in the right building. She nodded.

'We're here to surrender,' I told the guard.

Surely this would make him look up. But no.

He could *not* have acted less interested in us. I was reminded of the guest entrance to Mount Olympus, through the lobby of the Empire State Building. Normally, I never went that way, but I knew Zeus hired the most unimpressible, disinterested beings he could find to guard the desk as a way to discourage visitors. I wondered if Nero had intentionally done the same thing here.

'I'm Apollo,' I continued. 'And this is Meg. I believe we're expected? As in … hard deadline at sunset or the city burns?'

The guard took a deep breath, as if it pained him to move. Keeping one finger in his novel, he picked up a pen and slapped it on the counter next to the sign-in book. 'Names. IDs.'

'You need our IDs to take us prisoner?' I asked.

The guard turned the page in his book and kept reading.

With a sigh, I pulled out my New York State junior driver's licence. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised that I'd have to show it one last time, just to complete my humiliation. I slid it across the counter. Then I signed the logbook for both of us. *Name(s): Lester (Apollo) and Meg. Here to see: Nero. Business: Surrender. Time in: 7:16 p.m. Time out: Probably never.*

Since Meg was a minor, I didn't expect her to have an ID, but she removed her gold scimitar rings and placed them next to my licence. I stifled the urge to shout, *Are you insane?* But Meg gave them up as if she'd done this a million times before. The guard took the rings and examined them without comment. He held up my licence and compared it to my face. His eyes were the colour of decade-old ice cubes.

He seemed to decide that, tragically, I looked as bad in real life as I did in my licence photo. He handed it back, along with Meg's rings.

'Elevator nine to your right,' he announced.

I almost thanked him. Then I thought better of it.

Meg grabbed my sleeve. ‘Come on, Lester.’

She led the way through the turnstile to elevator nine. Inside, the stainless-steel box had no buttons. It simply rose on its own as soon as the doors slid closed. One small mercy: no elevator music, just the smooth hum of machinery, as bright and efficient as an industrial-grade meat slicer.

‘What should I expect when we get to the top?’ I asked Meg.

I imagined the elevator was under surveillance, but I couldn’t help asking. I wanted to hear Meg’s voice. I also wanted to keep her from sinking completely into her own dark thoughts. She was getting that shuttered expression she often had when she thought about her horrible stepfather, as if her brain were shutting down all non-essential services and boarding itself up in preparation for a hurricane.

She pushed her rings back on her middle fingers. ‘Take whatever you think might happen,’ she advised, ‘and turn it upside down and inside out.’

That was not exactly the reassurance I’d been hoping for. My chest already felt like it was being turned upside down and inside out. I was unnerved to be entering Nero’s lair with two empty quivers and a waterlogged ukulele. I was unnerved that no one had arrested us on sight, and that the security guard had given Meg back her rings, as if a couple of magical scimitars would make absolutely no difference to our fate.

Nevertheless, I straightened my back and squeezed Meg’s hand one more time. ‘We’ll do what we have to.’

The elevator doors slid open, and we stepped into the imperial antechamber.

‘Welcome!’

The young lady who greeted us wore a black business suit, high heels and an earpiece in her left ear. Her luxurious green hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her face was made up to give her a rosier, more human complexion, but the green tint in her eyes and the points of her ears gave her away as a dryad. ‘I’m Areca. Before you meet the emperor, can I get you a beverage? Water? Coffee? Tea?’

She spoke with forced cheerfulness. Her eyes said, *Help, I’m a hostage!*

‘Um, I’m good,’ I said, a feeble lie. Meg shook her head.

‘Great!’ Areca lied in return. ‘Follow me!’

I translated this to mean *Run while you can!* She hesitated, giving us time to reconsider our life choices. When we did not scream and dive back into the elevator, she guided us towards a set of double golden doors at the end of the hallway.

These opened from within, revealing the loft space/throne room I’d seen in my nightmare.

Floor-to-ceiling windows provided a 360-degree view of Manhattan at sunset. To the west, the sky was blood-red over New Jersey, the Hudson River a glowing purple artery. To the east, the urban canyons filled with shadow. Several varieties of potted trees lined the windows, which struck me as strange. Nero’s decorating taste usually tended more towards gold filigree and severed heads.

Rich Persian rugs made an asymmetrical chequerboard across the hardwood floor. Rows of black marble pillars supported the ceiling, reminding me a bit too much of Kronos’s palace. (He and his Titans had been all about black marble. That was one reason Zeus insisted on Mount Olympus’s strict building codes that kept everything blinding white.)

The room was full of people, carefully positioned, frozen in place, all staring at us as if they’d been practising on their marks for days and Nero had shrieked only seconds ago, *Places, everyone! They’re here!* If they started in on a

choreographed dance number, I was going to dive through the nearest window.

Lined up on Nero's left were the eleven young demigods of the Imperial Household, aka the Evil von Trapp children, all wearing their best purple-trimmed togas over fashionably tattered jeans and collared shirts, perhaps because T-shirts were against the dress code when the family welcomed important prisoners to be executed. Many of the older demigods glared at Meg.

On the emperor's right stood a dozen servants: young ladies with serving trays and drink pitchers; buff young men with palm-frond fans, though the room's AC was set to *Antarctic winter* . One young man, who had obviously lost a bet, was massaging the emperor's feet.

Half a dozen Germani flanked the throne – including Gunther, our buddy from the Acela ride into New York. He studied me, as if imagining all the interesting and painful ways he could remove my head from my shoulders. Next to him, at the emperor's right hand, stood Luguselwa.

I had to force myself not to sigh with relief. Of course, she looked terrible. Steel braces encased her legs. She had a crutch under each arm. She wore a neck brace as well, and the skin around her eyes was a raccoon mask of bruises. Her mohawk was the only part of her that didn't appear damaged. But, considering that I'd thrown her off a building only three days before, it was remarkable to see her on her feet at all. We needed her for our plan to succeed. Also, if Lu had ended up dying from her injuries, Meg probably would have killed me before Nero got the chance.

The emperor himself lounged on his gaudy purple sofa. He had exchanged his bathrobe for a tunic and traditional Roman toga, which I supposed wasn't much different from his bed-wear. His golden laurels had been recently polished. His neck beard glistened with oil. If his

expression had been any smugger, the entire species of domestic cats would have sued him for plagiarism.

'Your Imperial Majesty!' Our guide, Areca, tried for a cheerful tone, but her voice cracked with fear. 'Your guests have arrived!'

Nero shooed her away. Areca hurried to the side of the room and stood by one of the potted plants, which was … Oh, of course. My heart thumped with sympathetic pain. Areca was standing by an areca palm, her life force. The emperor had decorated his throne room with the enslaved: potted dryads.

Next to me, I could actually *hear* Meg's teeth grinding. I presumed the dryads were a new addition, maybe put here just to remind Meg who held all the power.

'Well, well!' Nero kicked away the young man who had been giving him a foot massage. 'Apollo. I am amazed.'

Luguselwa shifted on her crutches. On her shaved scalp, veins stood out as stiff as tree roots. 'You see, my lord? I told you they would come.'

'Yes. Yes, you did.' Nero's voice was heavy and cold. He leaned forward and laced his fingers, his belly bulging against his tunic. I thought of Dionysus staying in a schlubby dad bod as a form of protest against Zeus. I wondered what Nero's excuse was.

'So, *Lester* , after all the trouble you've caused me, why would you roll over and surrender now?'

I blinked. 'You threatened to burn down the city.'

'Oh, come now.' He gave me a conspiratorial smile. 'You and I have both stood by and watched cities burn before. Now, my precious Meg here …' He regarded her with such tender warmth I wanted to vomit on his Persian rug. 'I can believe *she* might want to save a city. She is a fine hero.'

The other demigods of the Imperial Household exchanged disgusted glances. Clearly, Meg was a favourite of Nero's, which made her an enemy of everyone else in her loving adopted family of sociopaths.

‘But, you, Lester,’ Nero continued. ‘No … I can’t believe you’ve turned so noble. We can’t change thousands of years of our nature so quickly, can we? You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t think it would serve … *you* .’

He pointed at my sternum. I could almost feel the pressure of his fingertip.

I tried to look agitated, which wasn’t hard. ‘Do you want me to surrender or not?’

Nero smiled at Luguselwa, then at Meg.

‘You know, Apollo,’ he said lazily, ‘it’s fascinating how bad acts can be good, and vice versa. You remember my mother, Agrippina? Terrible woman. Always trying to rule for me, telling me what to do. I had to kill her in the end. Well, not me personally, of course. I had my man Anicetus do it.’ He gave me a little shrug, like, *Mothers, am I right?* ‘Anyway, matricide was one of the worst crimes for a Roman. Yet, after I killed her, the people loved me even more! I’d stood up for myself, shown my independence. I became a hero to the common man! Then there were all those stories about me burning Christians alive …’

I wasn’t sure where Nero was going with all this. We’d been talking about my surrender. Now he was telling me about his mother and his Christian-burning parties. I just wanted to get thrown in a cell with Meg, preferably un-tortured, so Lu could come by later and release us and help us destroy the whole tower. Was that too much to ask? But when an emperor starts talking about himself, you just have to roll with it. You could be there for a while.

‘You’re claiming those Christian-burning stories weren’t true?’ I asked.

He laughed. ‘Of course they were true. The Christians were terrorists, out to undermine traditional Roman values. Oh, they *claimed* to be a religion of peace, but they fooled no one. The point is, *real* Romans loved me for taking a hard line. After I died … Did you know this? After I died, the commoners rioted. They refused to believe I was dead.

There was a wave of rebellions, and every rebel leader claimed to be me reborn.' He got a dreamy look in his eyes. 'I was beloved. My so-called bad acts made me wildly popular, while my *good* acts, like pardoning my enemies, bringing the empire peace and stability … those things just made me look soft and got me killed. This time, I will do things differently. I will bring back traditional Roman values. I will stop worrying about good and evil. The people who survive the transition … they will love me like a father.'

He gestured to his line of adopted children, all of whom knew enough to keep their expressions carefully neutral.

That old metaphorical skink was trying to claw its way back up my throat. The fact that Nero – a man who had killed his own mother – was talking about defending traditional Roman values … that was just about the most Roman thing I could imagine. And the idea that he wanted to play Daddy to the entire world made my guts churn. I pictured my friends from Camp Half-Blood forced to stand in rows behind the emperor's servants. I thought of Meg falling back into line with the rest of the Imperial Household.

She would be the twelfth, I realized. Twelve foster children to Nero, like the twelve Olympians. That couldn't be a coincidence. Nero was raising them as young gods-in-training to take over his nightmarish new world. That made Nero the new Kronos, the all-powerful father who could either shower his children with blessings or devour them as he wished. I had *badly* underestimated Nero's megalomania.

'Where was I?' Nero mused, coming back from his pleasant thoughts of massacre.

'The villain monologue,' I said.

'Ah, now I remember! Good and bad acts. You, Apollo, are here to surrender, sacrificing yourself to save the city. Seems like a good act! That's exactly why I suspect it's bad. Luguselwa!'

The Gaul didn't strike me as someone who flinched easily, but when Nero yelled her name her leg braces squeaked. 'My lord?'

'What was the plan?' Nero asked.

Frost formed in my lungs.

Lu did her best to look confused. 'My lord?'

'The plan,' he snapped. 'You let these two go on purpose. They turn themselves in just before my ultimatum deadline. What were you hoping to gain when you betrayed me?'

'My lord, no. I –'

'Seize them!'

The throne-room choreography suddenly became clear. Everyone played their parts beautifully. The servants backed away. The demigods of the Imperial Household stepped forward and drew swords. I didn't notice the Germani sneaking up behind us until two burly giants gripped my arms. Two more took hold of Meg. Gunther and a friend grabbed hold of Luguselwa with such gusto her crutches clattered to the floor. Fully healed, Luguselwa doubtless would have given them a good fight, but in her current condition there was no contest. They pushed her down, prostrate, in front of the emperor, ignoring her screams and the creaking of her leg braces.

'Stop it!' Meg thrashed, but her captors outweighed her by several hundred pounds. I kicked my Germani in the shins to no avail. I might as well have been kicking a forest bull.

Nero's eyes gleamed with amusement. 'You see, children,' he told his adopted eleven, 'if you ever decide to depose me, you'll have to do *much* better than this. Honestly, I'm disappointed.'

He twirled some whiskers in his chin beard, probably because he didn't have a proper villain's moustache. 'Let's see if I have this right, Apollo. You surrender yourself to get inside my tower, hoping this convinces me not to burn the city, while also making me lower my guard. Meanwhile,

your little army of demigods musters at Camp Half-Blood …' He smiled cruelly. 'Yes, I have it on good authority they are preparing to march. So exciting! Then, when they attack, Luguselwa frees you from your cell, and, together, in all the confusion, you somehow manage to kill me. Is that about it?'

My heart clawed at my chest like a troglodyte at a rock wall. If Camp Half-Blood was truly on the march, that meant Rachel might have got to the surface and contacted them. Which meant Will and Nico might also still be alive, and still with the troglodytes. Or Nero could be lying. Or he could know more than he was letting on. In any case, Luguselwa was exposed, which meant she couldn't free us or help us destroy the emperor's fasces. Whether or not Nico and the trogs managed their sabotage, our friends from camp would be charging to their own slaughter. Oh, and, also, I would die.

Nero laughed with delight. 'There it is!' He pointed to my face. 'The expression someone makes when they realize their life is over. You can't fake that. So beautifully honest! And you're right, of course.'

'Nero, don't!' Meg yelled. 'F-Father!'

The word seemed to hurt her, like she was coughing up a chunk of glass.

Nero pouted and spread his arms, as if he would welcome Meg into his loving embrace if it weren't for the two large goons holding her in place. 'Oh, my dear sweet daughter. I am so sorry you decided to be part of this. I wish I could spare you from the pain that is to come. But you know very well … you should never anger the Beast.'

Meg wailed and tried to bite one of her guards. I wished I had her ferocity. Absolute terror had turned my limbs to putty.

'Cassius,' Nero called, 'come forward, Son.'

The youngest demigod hurried to the dais. He couldn't have been more than eight years old.

Nero patted his cheek. ‘There’s a good boy. Go and collect your sister’s gold rings, will you? I hope you will put them to better use than she did.’

After a moment’s hesitation, as if translating these instructions from Neroese, Cassius jogged over to Meg. He carefully avoided her eyes as he worked the rings from her middle fingers.

‘Cass.’ Meg was weeping now. ‘Don’t. Don’t listen to him.’

The little boy blushed, but he kept working silently at the rings. He had pink stains around his lips from something he’d been drinking – juice, soda. His fluffy blond hair reminded me … No. No, I refused to think it. Argh. Too late! Curse my imagination! He reminded me of a young Jason Grace.

When he had tugged both rings free, Cassius hurried back to his stepfather.

‘Good, good,’ Nero said, with a hint of impatience. ‘Put them on. You’ve trained with scimitars, have you not?’

Cassius nodded, fumbling to comply.

Nero smiled at me, rather like the emcee of a show. *Thank you for your patience. We’re experiencing technical difficulties.*

‘You know, Apollo,’ he said, ‘there is one saying I like from the Christians. How does it go? *If your hands offend you, cut them off* … Something like that.’ He looked down at Lu. ‘Oh, Lu, I’m afraid your hands have offended me. Cassius, do the honours.’

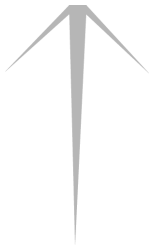
Luguselwa struggled and screamed as the guards stretched her arms in front of her, but she was weak and already in pain. Cassius swallowed, his face a mixture of horror and hunger.

Nero’s hard eyes, the eyes of the Beast, bored into him. ‘Now, boy,’ he said with chilling calm.

Cassius summoned the golden blades. As he brought them down on Lu’s wrists, the whole room seemed to tilt

and blur. I could no longer tell who was screaming – Lu, or Meg, or me.

Through a fog of pain and nausea, I heard Nero snap, ‘Bind her wounds! She won’t get to die so easily!’ Then he turned the eyes of the Beast on me. ‘Now, Apollo, let me tell you the *new* plan. You will be thrown into a cell with this traitor, Luguselwa. And Meg, dear Meg, we will begin your rehabilitation. Welcome home.’



21

Fear the comfy couch.
Fear the jailer's fruit platter
And shiny toilet.

NERO'S CELL WAS THE NICEST PLACE I'D ever been imprisoned in. I would have rated it five stars. *Absolute luxury! Would die here again!*

From the high ceiling hung a chandelier … a *chandelier* , much too far out of reach for a prisoner to grab. Crystal pendants danced in the LED lights, casting diamond-shaped reflections across the eggshell-white walls. In the back of the room sat a sink with gold fixtures and an automated toilet with a bidet, all shielded behind a privacy screen – what pampering! One of Nero's Persian carpets covered the floor. Two plush Roman-style sofas were arranged in a V on either side of a coffee table overflowing with cheese, crackers and fruit, plus a silver pitcher of water and two goblets, in case we prisoners wanted to toast our good luck. Only the front wall had a jailhouse look, since it was nothing but a row of thick metal bars, but even these were coated with – or perhaps made from – Imperial gold.

I spent the first twenty or thirty minutes alone in the cell. It was hard to measure time. I paced, I screamed, I demanded to see Meg. I banged a silver platter against the bars and howled into the empty corridor outside. Finally, as my fear and queasiness got the best of me, I discovered the joys of vomiting into a high-end toilet with a heated seat and multiple self-cleaning options.

I was beginning to think Luguselwa must have died. Why else was she not in the cell with me, as Nero had promised? How could she have survived the shock of double amputation when she was already so badly injured?

Just as I was convincing myself I would die alone in this cell, with no one to help me eat the cheese and crackers, a door banged open somewhere down the hall, followed by heavy footsteps and lots of grunting. Gunther and another Germanus came into view, dragging Luguselwa between them. The middle three bars of the cell entrance fell away, retracting into the floor as fast as sheathed blades. The guards pushed Lu inside, and the bars snapped closed again.

I rushed to Lu's side. She curled on the Persian carpet, her body shivering and splattered with blood. Her leg braces had been removed. Her face was paler than the walls. Her wrists had been bandaged, but the wrappings were already soaked through. Her brow burned with fever.

'She needs a doctor!' I yelled.

Gunther leered at me. 'Ain't you a healing god?'

His friend snorted, then the two of them lumbered back down the hall.

'Erggh,' Lu muttered.

'Hold on,' I said. Then I winced, realizing that probably wasn't a sensitive thing to say, given her condition. I scrambled back to my comfy sofa and rummaged through my pack. The guards had taken my bow and quivers, including the Arrow of Dodona, but they'd left me everything that wasn't obviously a weapon – my

waterlogged ukulele and my backpack, including some med supplies Will had given me: bandages, ointments, pills, nectar, ambrosia. Could Gauls take ambrosia? Could they take aspirin? I had no time to worry about that.

I soaked some linen napkins in the ice-water pitcher and wrapped them across Lu's head and neck to lower her temperature. I crushed some painkillers together with ambrosia and nectar and fed her some of the mush, though she could barely swallow. Her eyes were unfocused. Her shivering was getting worse.

She croaked, 'Meg –?'

'Hush,' I said, trying not to cry. 'We'll save her, I swear. But first you have to heal.'

She whimpered, then made a high-pitched noise like a scream with no energy behind it. She had to be in unbelievable pain. She should have been dead already, but the Gaul was tough.

'You need to be asleep for what comes next,' I warned. 'I – I'm sorry. But I have to check your wrists. I have to clean the wounds and re-bandage them or you'll die from sepsis.'

I had no idea how I was going to accomplish this without her dying from blood loss or shock, but I had to try. The guards had tied off her wrists sloppily. I doubted they'd bothered with sterilization. They had slowed the bleeding, but Lu would still die unless I intervened.

I grabbed another napkin and a vial of chloroform – one of Will's more dangerous med-kit components. Using it was a huge risk, but the desperate circumstances left me little choice, unless I wanted to knock Lu over the head with a cheese platter.

I moved the soaked napkin over her face.

'No,' she said feebly. 'Can't …'

'It's either this or pass out from the pain as soon as I touch those wrists.'

She grimaced, then nodded.

I pressed the cloth against her nose and mouth. Two breaths, and her body went limp. For her own sake, I prayed she would stay unconscious.

I worked as fast as I could. My hands were surprisingly steady. The medical knowledge came back out of instinct. I didn't think about the grave injuries I was looking at, nor the amount of blood … I just did the work. Tourniquet. Sterilize. I would've tried to reattach her hands, despite the hopeless odds, but they hadn't bothered to bring them. Sure, give me a chandelier and a selection of fruit, but no hands.

'Cauterize,' I mumbled to myself. 'I need –'

My right hand burst into flame.

At the time, I didn't find this strange. A little spark of my old sun-god power? Sure, why not? I sealed the stumps of Lu's poor wrists, slathered them with healing ointment, then re-bandaged them properly, leaving her with two stubby Q-tips instead of hands.

'I'm so sorry,' I said.

Guilt weighed me down like a suit of armour. I had been so suspicious of Lu, when all the time she'd been risking her life trying to help. Her only crime was underestimating Nero, just as we all had. And the price she'd paid …

You have to understand, to a musician like me, no punishment could be as bad as losing one's hands – to no longer be able to play the keyboard or the fretboard, to never again summon music with one's fingers. Making music was its own sort of divinity. I imagined Lu felt the same way about her fighting skills. She would never again hold a weapon.

Nero's cruelty was beyond measure. I wanted to cauterize the smirk off his smug face.

Attend to your patient, I chided myself.

I grabbed pillows from the sofa and positioned them around Lu, trying to make her as comfortable on the carpet as I could. Even if I'd wanted to risk moving her to the sofa,

I doubted I would have had the strength. I dabbed her forehead with more cold cloths. I dribbled water and nectar into her mouth. Then I put my hand against her carotid artery and concentrated with all my might. *Heal, heal, heal.*

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought some of my old power stirred. My fingers warmed against her skin. Her pulse began to stabilize. Her breathing came easier. Her fever lessened.

I had done what I could. I crawled across the floor and climbed onto my sofa, my head swimming with exhaustion.

How much time had passed? I didn't know if Nero had decided to destroy New York or wait until the forces of Camp Half-Blood came within range. The city could be burning around me right now and I'd see no sign of it in this windowless cell within Nero's self-contained tower. The AC would keep blowing. The chandelier would keep glittering. The toilet would keep flushing.

And Meg … Oh, gods, what would Nero be doing to 'rehabilitate' her?

I couldn't bear it. I had to get up. I had to save my friend. But my exhausted body had other ideas.

My vision turned watery. I keeled over sideways, and my thoughts sank into a pool of shadow.

'Hey, man.'

The familiar voice seemed to come from half a world away over a weak satellite connection.

As the scene resolved, I found myself sitting at a picnic table on the beach in Santa Monica. Nearby stood the fish-taco shack where Jason, Piper, Meg and I had eaten our last meal before infiltrating Caligula's fleet of mega-yachts. Across the table sat Jason Grace, glowing and insubstantial, like a video projected against a cloud.

'Jason.' My voice was a ruined sob. 'You're here.'

His smile flickered. His eyes were nothing but smudges of turquoise dye. Still, I could feel the quiet strength of his

presence, and I heard the kindness in his voice. ‘Not really, Apollo. I’m dead. You’re dreaming. But it’s good to see you.’

I looked down, not trusting myself to speak. Before me sat a plate of fish tacos that had been turned into gold, like the work of King Midas. I didn’t know what that meant. I didn’t like it.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I managed at last.

‘No, no,’ Jason said. ‘I made my choice. You’re not to blame. You don’t owe me anything except to remember what I said. Remember what’s important.’

‘*You’re* important,’ I said. ‘Your life!’

Jason tilted his head. ‘I mean … sure. But if a hero isn’t ready to lose everything for a greater cause, is that person really a hero?’

He weighted the word *person* subtly, as if to stress it could mean a human, a faun, a dryad, a griffin, a *pandos* … even a god.

‘But …’ I struggled to find a counter-argument. I wanted so badly to reach across the table, grip Jason’s wrists and pull him back into the world of the living. But, even if I could, I realized I wouldn’t have been doing it for Jason. He was at peace with his choices. I would have been bringing him back for my own selfish reasons, because I didn’t want to deal with the sorrow and grief of having lost him.

‘All right,’ I relented. A fist of pain that had been clenching in my chest for weeks began to loosen. ‘All right, Jason. We miss you, though.’

His face rippled into coloured smoke. ‘I miss you, too. All of you. Apollo, do me a favour. Beware Mithras’s servant – the lion, snake-entwined. You know what it is, and what it can do.’

‘I – what? No, I don’t! Tell me, please!’

Jason managed one last faint smile. ‘I’m just a dream in your head, man. You’ve already got the info. I’m just saying … there’s a price for bargaining with the guardian of the

stars. Sometimes you have to pay that price. Sometimes, you have to let someone else do it.'

This cleared up absolutely nothing, but the dream allowed me no more time for questions.

Jason dissolved. My golden fish tacos turned to dust. The Santa Barbara coastline melted, and I woke with a start on my comfy sofa.

'You alive?' asked a hoarse voice.

Lu lay on the opposite couch. How she'd got herself there from the floor, I couldn't imagine. Her cheeks and eyes were sunken. Her bandaged stumps were speckled with brown polka dots where new blood had seeped through. But she looked a bit less pale, and her eyes were remarkably clear. I could only conclude that my godly healing powers – wherever they had come from – must have done some good.

I was so surprised that I needed a moment to find my voice. 'I – I should be asking *you* that question. How is the pain?'

She lifted her stumps gingerly. 'What, these? I've had worse.'

'My gods,' I marvelled. 'A sense of humour? You really are indestructible.'

Her facial muscles tensed – maybe an attempt to smile, or just a reaction to her constant searing agony. 'Meg. What happened to her? How do we find her?'

I couldn't help but admire her singlemindedness. Despite her pain and her unfair punishment, Lu was still focused on helping our young friend.

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'We'll find her, but first you have to get your strength back. When we break out of here, you'll have to be able to move under your own power. I don't think I can carry you.'

'No?' Lu asked. 'I was looking forward to a piggyback ride.'

Wow, I guess Gauls get punchy when they suffer life-threatening injuries.

Of course, the whole idea of us busting out of our cell was absurd. Even if we managed it, we were in no shape to rescue Meg or fight the emperor's forces. But I couldn't lose hope, especially when my no-handed companion was still able to crack jokes.

Also, my dream of Jason had reminded me that the emperor's fasces was hidden somewhere on this floor of the tower, guarded by the snake-entwined lion. The guardian of the stars, Mithras's servant, whatever that meant – it had to be close. And if it required a price for letting us stomp-kick Nero's rod of immortality into splinters, I was willing to pay it.

'I've got some ambrosia left.' I turned and groped for my med pack. 'You need to eat –'

The door at the end of the corridor slammed open. Gunther appeared outside our cell, holding a silver tray laden with sandwiches and assorted canned sodas.

He grinned, showing off all three of his teeth. 'Lunch.'

The cell's middle bars dropped with the speed of a guillotine. Gunther slid the tray through, and the bars snapped shut again before I could even think of making a move for our captor.

I needed food badly, but just looking at the sandwiches made my stomach roil. Someone had trimmed the crusts off the bread. They were cut into squares rather than triangles. This is how you can tell when your lunch has been prepared by barbarians.

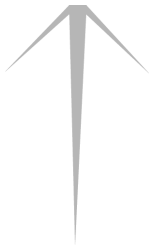
'Get your strength back!' Gunther said cheerfully. 'Don't die before the party!'

'Party?' I asked, feeling the tiniest spark of hope.

Not because parties were fun, or because I liked cake (both were true), but because if Nero had postponed his big celebration, then perhaps he hadn't yet pressed his doomsday button.

‘Oh, yes!’ Gunther said. ‘Tonight! Torture for you both. And then we burn down the city!’

With that happy thought, Gunther strolled back down the hall, chuckling to himself, leaving us with our tray of barbarian sandwiches.



22

I will go to sleep
To save everyone I love.
Don't thank me. It's cool.

GODS AREN'T GREAT WITH DEADLINES.

The concept of having a limited time to do something just doesn't make much sense to an immortal. Since turning into Lester Papadopoulos, I'd got used to the idea: go here by this date or the world ends. Get this item by next week or everyone you know will die.

Still, I was shocked to realize that Nero was planning to burn down New York that very evening – with cake, festivities and a good deal of torture – and there was nothing I could do about it.

I stared through the bars after Gunther left. I waited for him to skip back into view and yell, *Just kidding!* , but the hallway remained empty. I could see very little of it except for blank white walls and a single security camera mounted on the ceiling, staring at me with its glossy black eye.

I turned to Lu. 'I have determined that our situation sucks.'

'Thanks.' She crossed her stumps over her chest like a pharaoh. 'I needed that perspective.'

‘There’s a security camera out there.’

‘Sure.’

‘Then how were you planning on breaking us out? You would’ve been seen.’

Lu grunted. ‘That’s only *one* camera. Easy to evade. The residential areas? They’re completely covered with surveillance from every angle, miked for sound, with motion detectors on all the entrances –’

‘I get the idea.’

It infuriated me, but did not surprise me, that Nero’s family would be under heavier surveillance than his prisoners. After all, this was a man who’d killed his own mother. Now he was raising his own brood of junior despots. I *had* to get to Meg.

I shook the bars, just to say I’d tried. They didn’t budge. I needed a burst of godly strength to Apollo-smash my way out, but I couldn’t rely on my powers to pay heed to what I wanted.

Trudging back to my sofa, I glared at the offensive sandwiches and sodas.

I tried to imagine what Meg was going through right now.

I pictured her in an opulent room much like this one – minus the bars, perhaps, but a cell nonetheless. Her every move would be recorded, her every conversation overheard. No wonder, back in the old days, she preferred to roam the alleys of Hell’s Kitchen, accosting thugs with bags of rotten vegetables and adopting former gods to be her servants. She wouldn’t have that outlet now. She wouldn’t have me or Luguselwa by her side. She would be utterly surrounded and utterly alone.

I had a sense of how Nero’s mind games worked. As a god of healing, I knew something about psychology and mental health, though I’ll admit I did not always apply best practices to myself.

Having unleashed the Beast, Nero would now feign kindness. He would try to convince Meg that she was

home. If she just let him ‘help’ her, she would be forgiven. Nero was his own good cop/bad cop – the consummate manipulator.

The thought of him trying to comfort a young girl he had just traumatized made me sick to my core.

Meg had got away from Nero once before. Defying his will must have taken more strength and courage than most gods I knew would ever possess. But now … thrust back into her old abusive environment, which Nero had passed off as normal for most of her childhood, she would need to be even stronger not to crumble. It would be so easy for her to forget how far she’d gone.

Remember what’s important. Jason’s voice echoed in my head, but Nero’s words were knocking around in there, too. *We can’t change thousands of years of our nature so quickly, can we?*

I knew my anxiety about my own weakness was getting mixed up with my anxiety about Meg. Even if I somehow made my way back to Mount Olympus, I didn’t trust myself to hold on to the important things I’d learned as a mortal. That made me doubt Meg’s ability to stay strong in her old toxic home.

The similarities between Nero’s household and my family on Mount Olympus made me increasingly uneasy. The idea that we gods were just as manipulative, just as abusive as the worst Roman emperor … Surely that couldn’t be true.

Oh, wait. Yes, it could. Ugh. I hated clarity. I preferred a softer Instagram filter on my life – Amaro, maybe, or Perpetua.

‘We will get out of here.’ Lu’s voice shook me from my miserable thoughts. ‘Then we’ll help Meg.’

Given her condition, this was a bold statement. I realized she was trying to lift my spirits. It felt unfair that she had to … and even more unfair that I needed it so much.

The only response I could think of was ‘Do you want a sandwich?’

She glanced down at the platter. ‘Yeah. Cucumber and cream cheese, if there is one. The chef does a good cucumber and cream cheese.’

I found the appropriate flavour. I wondered if, back in ancient times, roving bands of Celtic warriors had ridden into battle with their packs full of cucumber-and-cream-cheese sandwiches. Perhaps that had been the secret to their success.

I fed her a few bites, but she became impatient. ‘Just set it on my chest. I’ll figure it out. I have to start sometime.’

She used her stumps to manoeuvre the food towards her mouth. How she could do this without passing out from pain, I didn’t know, but I respected her wishes. My son Asclepius, god of medicine, used to chide me about helping those with disabilities. *You can help them if they ask. But wait for them to ask. It’s their choice to make, not yours* .

For a god, this was a hard thing to understand, much like deadlines, but I left Lu to her meal. I picked out a couple of sandwiches for myself: ham and cheese, egg salad. It had been a long time since I’d eaten. I had no appetite, but I would need energy if we were going to get out of here.

Energy … and information.

I looked at Lu. ‘You mentioned microphones.’

Her sandwich slipped from between her stumps and landed in her lap. With the slightest of frowns, she began the slow process of corralling it again. ‘Surveillance mikes, you mean. What about them?’

‘Are there any in this cell?’

Lu looked confused. ‘You want to know if the guards are listening to us? I don’t think so. Unless they’ve installed mikes in the last twenty-four hours. Nero doesn’t care what prisoners chat about. He doesn’t like it when people whine and complain. He’s the only one allowed to do that.’

That made perfect Nero-ish sense.

I wanted to discuss plans with Lu – if for no other reason than to raise her spirits, to let her know that my terrific

troglodyte tunnelling team might be on their way to scuttle Nero's Greek-fire Sewer Super Soakers, which would mean that Lu's sacrifice had not been completely in vain. Still, I would have to be careful what I said. I didn't want to assume we had privacy. We'd underestimated Nero too many times already.

'The emperor didn't seem to know about … the *other* thing,' I said.

Lu's sandwich toppled into her lap again. 'You mean the other thing is *happening* ? You were able to arrange it?'

I could only hope we were talking about the same *other thing* . Lu had instructed us to arrange an underground sabotage of some sort, but for obvious reasons I hadn't had a chance to tell her specifics about Nico, Will, Rachel and the troglodytes. (Which, by the way, would make the worst band name of all time.)

'I hope so,' I said. 'Assuming everything went according to plan.' I did not add *And the troglodytes didn't eat my friends because we brought evil red cattle into their encampment.* 'But, let's be honest, so far things have not gone according to plan.'

Lu picked up her sandwich again – this time with more dexterity. 'I don't know about you, but I've got Nero exactly where I want him.'

I had to smile. My gods, this Gaul … I had gone from disliking and distrusting her to being ready to take a bullet for her. I wanted her at my side, hands or no, as we took down the emperor and saved Meg. And we *would* do it, if I could muster even a little bit of Lu's toughness.

'Nero should fear you,' I agreed. 'Let's assume *the other thing* is happening. Let's also assume we can get out of here and take care of the … um, *other* other thing.'

Lu rolled her eyes. 'You mean the emperor's fasces.'

I winced. 'Yes, fine. That. It would be helpful if I had more information about its protector. Jason called it a guardian of the stars, a creature of Mithras, but –'

‘Wait. Who is Jason?’

I didn’t want to revisit that painful subject, but I gave her the basics, then explained what I had discussed with the son of Jupiter in my dream.

Lu tried to sit up. Her face turned the colour of putty, making her tattoos darken to purple.

‘Oof.’ She reclined again. ‘Mithras, eh? Haven’t heard that name in a while. Lots of Roman officers worshipped him, back in the day, but I never took to those Persian gods. You had to join his cult to find out all the secret handshakes and whatnot. Elite, members-only society, blah, blah. The emperor was an automatic member, of course, which makes sense …’

‘Because?’

She chewed her cucumber sandwich. ‘Explains how Nero would have found this guardian. I – I don’t know what it is. I saw it only once, when Nero … installed it, I guess you’d say. Years ago.’ She shuddered. ‘Never want to see it again. That lion’s face, those eyes … like it could see everything about me, like it was challenging me to …’ She shook her head. ‘You’re right. We need more information if we’re going to beat it. And we need to know how Meg is doing.’

Why was she looking at me so expectantly?

‘That would be great,’ I agreed. ‘But since we’re stuck in a cell –’

‘You just told me you had a dream vision. Do you have those often?’

‘Well, yes. But I don’t control them. At least, not well.’

Lu snorted. ‘Typical Roman.’

‘Greek.’

‘Whatever. Dreams are a vehicle, like a chariot. You have to drive them. You can’t let them drive you.’

‘You want me to, what … go back to sleep? Gather more information in my dreams?’

Her eyelids started to droop. Perhaps the word *sleep* had reminded her body that this was a great idea. In her

condition, just being awake a few hours and eating a sandwich would have been equivalent to running a marathon.

'Sounds like a plan,' Lu agreed. 'If it's lunchtime now, that gives us what – seven, eight hours before sunset? Nero will have his party at sunset, I'm sure. Best time of day to watch a city burn. Wake me up when you know more.'

'But what if I can't get to sleep? And, if I do, who's going to wake *me* up?'

Lu started to snore.

A tiny piece of cucumber was stuck to her chin, but I decided to leave it there. She might want it later.

I sat back on my sofa and stared at the chandelier twinkling cheerfully above.

A party tonight for the burning of Manhattan. Nero would torture us. Then, I imagined, he would sacrifice me in one way or another to appease Python and seal their alliance.

I had to think fast and move faster.

I needed my *powers* – strength to bend bars or break through walls, fire to melt Gunther's face the next time he brought us crustless sandwiches.

I did *not* need a nap.

And yet … Lu wasn't wrong. Dreams could be vehicles.

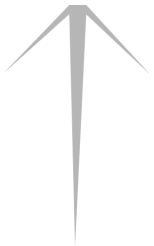
As the god of prophecy, I'd often sent visions to those who needed them – warnings, glimpses of the future, suggestions for what sort of temple incense I liked best. I'd driven dreams right into people's heads. But, since I'd been mortal, I'd lost that confidence. I had let my dreams drive me, rather than taking the reins like when I drove the sun chariot. My team of fiery horses could always feel when their driver was weak or uncertain. (Poor Phaethon had found that out the hard way.) Dreams were no less ornery.

I needed to see what was happening with Meg. I needed to see this guardian that watched the emperor's fasces, so I could figure out how to destroy it. I needed to know whether Nico, Will and Rachel were safe.

If I took the reins of my dreams and yelled, *Giddyap!* , what would happen? At the very least, I would have unsettling nightmares. At worst, I might drive my mind over the Cliffs of Insanity and never wake up.

But my friends were counting on me.

So I did the heroic thing. I closed my eyes and went to sleep.



23

Dream chariot, go!
Out of my way, I'm a god!
Honk, honk. Beep, beep. Zoom.

DRIVING THE DREAM CHARIOT DID NOT go well. If the dream police had been on patrol, they would have pulled me over and given me a ticket.

Immediately, a psychic crosswind caught my consciousness. I tumbled through the floor, falling past stairwells and offices and broom closets, swirling into the bowels of the tower like I'd been flushed down the cosmic toilet. (Which is a disgusting plumbing fixture, by the way. No one ever cleans it.)

GO UP, GO UP! I willed my dream, but I couldn't seem to find the reins.

I plummeted straight through a vat of Greek fire. That was different. I hit the tunnels below Manhattan, glancing around desperately for any sign of my friends and the troglodytes, but I was travelling too fast, spinning like a pinwheel. I broke through into the Labyrinth and hurtled sideways, swept along by a current of superheated ether.

I can do this, I told myself. *It's just like driving a chariot. Except with no horses. Or chariot. Or body.*

I ordered my dream to take me to Meg – the person I most wanted to see. I imagined my hands reaching out, grasping reins. Just when I thought I had them, my dreamscape stabilized. I found myself back in the caverns of Delphi, volcanic gases layering the air, the dark shape of Python moving heavily in the shadows.

'So, I have you again,' he gloated. 'You shall perish –'

'I don't have time for you right now.' My voice surprised me almost as much as it did the reptile.

'What?'

'Gotta go.' I lashed the reins of my dream.

'How dare you! You cannot –'

I rocketed into reverse like I was tied to a rubber band.

Why backwards? I hated sitting backwards in a moving vehicle, but I suppose the dream was still trying to show me who was boss. I did a roller-coaster rewind through the Labyrinth, the mortal tunnels, the stairwells of the tower. Finally, I lurched to a stop. My stomach clenched, and I retched up … well, whatever ethereal spirit-stuff one can retch in the dream world.

My head and stomach orbited each other like wobbly lava planets. I found myself on my knees in an extravagant bedroom. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Midtown all the way to the Hudson River. The cityscape was still mercifully un-torched.

Meg McCaffrey was busy trashing the bedroom. Even without her blades, she was doing an A+ demolition job with a broken chair leg, which she swung wildly into just about everything. Meanwhile, a Germanus stood blocking the only exit, his arms folded, his expression unimpressed. A woman in an old-fashioned black-and-white maid's uniform wrung her hands and winced every time something went *CRASH.* She held a stack of what looked like party dresses draped over one arm.

'Miss,' said the maid, 'if you could just choose an outfit for tonight. Perhaps if you didn't … Oh. Oh, that was an

antique. No, that's fine. I'll get another – OH! Very well, Miss, if you don't like those bed linens I can – There's no need to shred them, Miss!'

Meg's tantrum raised my spirits considerably. *That's it, my friend!* I thought. *Give them Tartarus!* Meg threw her broken chair leg into a lamp, then picked up another whole chair and raised it over her head, ready to hurl it at the window.

A faint knock on the bedroom door made her freeze. The Germanus stepped aside, opened the door and bowed as Nero swept into the room.

'Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry.' The emperor's voice oozed sympathy. 'Come. Sit with me.'

He moved smoothly to the bed and sat at the edge, patting the ripped comforter next to him.

I silently rooted for Meg to brain him with the chair. He was right there, in easy reach. But I realized that was Nero's intention … to make himself seem to be at Meg's mercy. To make *her* responsible for choosing violence. And, if she did, he would be free to punish her.

She put down the chair, but she didn't go to Nero. She turned her back and crossed her arms. Her lips trembled. I wanted so badly to go to her, to shield her. I wanted to drive my dream chariot into Nero's face, but I could only watch.

'I know you feel terrible,' Nero said, 'after what you did to your friend.'

She wheeled around. 'After what *I* DID?!'

She picked up the chair again and threw it across the room – but not at Nero. It whanged off the window, leaving a smudge but no cracks. I caught the flicker of a smile on Nero's face – a smile of satisfaction – before his expression fixed back into a mask of sympathy. 'Yes, dear. This anger comes from guilt. You led Apollo here. You understood what that meant, what would happen. But you did it anyway.

That must be so painful … knowing you brought him to his end.'

Her arms trembled. 'I – no. You cut off –' She gagged, clearly unable to say the words. She stared down at her own fists, clenched as if they might fly off her wrists if left unattended.

'You can't blame yourself,' Nero said in a tone that somehow implied, *This is all your fault.*

'Luguselwa made the wrong choice. You know that. You must have understood what would happen. You are too smart to be blind. We've talked about consequences so often.' He sighed with regret. 'Perhaps Cassius *was* too harsh, taking her hands.' He tilted his head. 'If you like, I can punish him for that.'

'What?' Meg was shaking, as if no longer sure where to direct the giant cannon of her anger. 'No! It wasn't him. It was –'

She choked on the obvious answer: *YOU.*

With Nero sitting right in front of her, talking in gentle tones, giving her his full attention, she faltered.

Meg! I shouted, but no sound came forth. *Meg, keep smashing things!*

'You have a kind heart,' Nero said with another sigh. 'You care about Apollo. About Lu. I understand that. And when you unleash the Beast …' He spread his hands. 'I know that is unsettling. But it isn't over, Meg. Will you sit with me? I'm not asking for a hug, or for you to stop being angry. But I have some news that may make you feel better.'

He patted the mattress again. The maid wrung her hands. The Germanus picked his teeth.

Meg wavered. I could imagine the thoughts racing through her head: *Is the news about Apollo? Will you offer to let him go if I cooperate? Is Lu still alive? Will she be released? And, if I don't play along with your wishes, will I be endangering them?*

Nero's unspoken message seemed to hang in the air: *This is all your fault, but you can still make it right.*

Slowly, Meg moved to the bed. She sat, her posture stiff and guarded. I wanted to lunge between her and Nero, to insert myself in the gap and make sure he could not get any closer, but I feared his influence was worse than physical … He was worming his way into her mind.

'Here is the good news, Meg,' he said. 'We will always have each other. I will never abandon you. You can never make a mistake so great I will not take you back. Lu betrayed you when she betrayed me. Apollo was unreliable, selfish and – dare I say – a narcissist. But I know you. I have raised you. This is your home.'

Oh, gods, I thought. Nero was so good at being evil, and so evil at being good, he made the words lose their meaning. He could tell you the floor was the ceiling with such conviction you might start believing it, especially since any disagreement would unleash the Beast.

I marvelled how such a man could rise to be emperor of Rome. Then I marvelled how such a man could ever lose *control* of Rome. It was easy to see how he'd got the mobs on his side.

Meg shivered, but whether from rage or despair, I couldn't be sure.

'There, there.' Nero put an arm around her shoulders. 'You can cry. It's all right. I'm here.'

A cold knot formed in my gut. I suspected that as soon as Meg's tears fell, the game would be over. All the independence she'd built and fought so hard to maintain would crumble. She would fold herself against Nero's chest, just as she'd done as a little girl, after Nero killed her real father. The Meg I knew would disappear under the twisted, tortured mess Nero had spent years cultivating.

The scene lost cohesion – perhaps because I was too upset to control my dream. Or perhaps I simply couldn't bear to watch what happened next. I tumbled down

through the tower, floor after floor, trying to regain the reins.

I'm not done, I insisted. *I need more information!*

Unfortunately, I got it.

I stopped in front of a golden door – never a good sign, golden doors. The dream swept me inside a small vault. I felt as if I'd entered a reactor core. Intense heat threatened to burn my dream-self into a cloud of dream-ashes. The air smelled heavy and toxic. Before me, floating above a pedestal of Stygian iron, was the fasces of Nero – a five-foot-tall golden axe, bundled with wooden rods and lashed together by gold cords. The ceremonial weapon pulsed with power – exponentially more than the two fasces Meg and I had destroyed at Sutro Tower.

The meaning of this dawned on me … whispered into my brain like a line of Python's poisoned prophecy. The three emperors of the Triumvirate hadn't just linked themselves through a corporation. Their life forces, their ambitions, their greed and malice, had entwined over the centuries. By killing Commodus and Caligula, I had consolidated all the power of the Triumvirate into the fasces of Nero. I had made the surviving emperor three times as powerful and harder to kill. Even if the fasces were unguarded, destroying it would be difficult.

And the fasces was *not* unguarded.

Behind the glowing axe, his hands spread as if in benediction, the guardian stood. His body was humanoid, seven feet tall. Patches of gold fur covered his muscular chest, arms and legs. His feathery white wings reminded me of one of Zeus's wind spirits, or the angels that Christians liked to paint.

His face, however, was not angelic. He had the shaggy-maned visage of a lion, ears rimmed with black fur, mouth open to reveal fangs and a panting red tongue. His huge golden eyes radiated a sort of sleepy, self-confident strength.

But the strangest thing about the guardian was the serpent that encircled his body from ankles to neck – a slithering spiral of green flesh that corkscrewed around him like an endless escalator – a snake with no head or tail.

The lion man saw me. My dream state was nothing to him. Those gold eyes locked onto me and would not let me go. They turned me and examined me as if I were a trog boy's crystal sphere.

He communicated wordlessly. He told me he was the *leontocephaline* , a creation of Mithras, a Persian god so secretive even we Olympians had never really understood him. In Mithras's name, the leontocephaline had overseen the movement of the stars and the phases of the zodiac. He had also been the keeper of Mithras's great sceptre of immortality, but that had been lost aeons ago. Now the leontocephaline had been given a new job, a new symbol of power to guard.

Just looking at him threatened to tear my mind apart. I tried to ask him questions. I understood that fighting him was impossible. He was eternal. He could no more be killed than one could kill time. He guarded the immortality of Nero, but wasn't there any way …?

Oh, yes. He could be bargained with. I saw what he wanted. The realization made my soul curl up like a squashed spider.

Nero was clever. Horribly, evilly clever. He had set a trap with his own symbol of power. He was cynically betting that I would never pay the price.

At last, his point made, the leontocephaline released me. My dream-self snapped back into my body.

I sat up in bed, gasping and soaked in sweat.

'About time,' Lu said.

Incredibly, she was on her feet, pacing the cell. My healing power must have done more than just soothe her amputation wounds. She wobbled a bit, but she did not look

like someone who'd been using crutches and leg braces just a day ago. Even the bruises on her face had faded.

'You … You look better,' I noted. 'How long was I out?'

'Too long. Gunther brought dinner an hour ago.' She nodded to a new platter of food on the floor. 'He said he'd be back soon to get us for the party. But the fool was careless. He left us silverware!'

She brandished her stumps.

Oh, gods. What had she done? Somehow, she had managed to attach a fork to one stump and a knife to the other. She had inserted the handles into the folds of her bandages, then fastened them in place with … Wait. Was that my surgical tape?

I looked at the foot of my bed. Sure enough, my pack was open, the contents scattered about.

I tried to ask *how* and *why* at the same time, so it came out as 'Hawhy?'

'If you have enough time, some tape and a set of working teeth, you can do a lot,' Lu said proudly. 'I couldn't wait for you to wake up. Didn't know when Gunther would be back. Sorry about the mess.'

'I –'

'You can help.' She tested her silverware attachments with a few kung fu jabs. 'I tied these babies on as tight as I could, but you can wrap them one more time. I have to be able to use them in combat.'

'Er –'

She plopped down on the sofa next to me. 'While you work, you can tell me what you learned.'

I was not about to argue with someone who could poke me in the eye with a fork. I was dubious about the effectiveness of her new combat attachments, but I didn't say anything. I understood that this was about Luguselwa taking charge of her situation, not giving up, doing what she could with what she had. When you've gone through a

life-changing shock, positive thinking is the most effective weapon you can wield.

I wrapped her utensils more tightly in place while explaining what I'd seen in my dream drive: Meg trying not to crumble under the influence of Nero, the emperor's fasces floating in its radioactive room, and the leontocephaline, waiting for us to try and take it.

'We'd best hurry, then.' Lu grimaced. 'Tighter with that tape.'

My efforts obviously hurt her, judging from the crinkles around her eyes, but I did as she asked.

'Right,' she said, swiping the air with her utensils. 'That'll have to do.'

I tried for a supportive smile. I wasn't sure Captain Fork and Knife would have much luck against Gunther or the leontocephaline, but if we met a hostile rib-eye steak, Lu would be queen of the combat.

'And no sign of the *other thing* ?' she asked.

I wished I could've told her yes. I had wanted so badly to see visions of the entire troglodyte corporation digging into Nero's basement and disabling his fire vats. I would have settled for a dream of Nico, Will and Rachel charging to our rescue, yelling loudly and waving noisemakers.

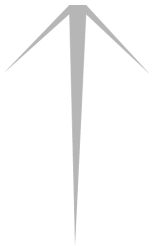
'Nothing,' I said. 'But we still have time.'

'Yeah,' Lu agreed. 'Minutes and minutes. Then the party starts and the city burns. But, okay. Let's concentrate on what we can do. I have a plan to get us out of here.'

A cold shiver ran down my neck as I thought about my silent conversation with the guardian of the fasces. 'And I have a plan for what to do when we get out.'

Then we both said together, 'You're not going to like it.'

'Oh, joy.' I sighed. 'Let's hear yours first.'



24

Fie upon Nero,
Who wants not my arrow's speech!
(I can relate, though.)

LU WAS RIGHT.

I hated her plan, but since time was short and Gunther might show up any minute with our party hats and various torture devices, I agreed to do my part.

Full disclosure: I also hated *my* plan. I explained to Lu what the leontocephaline would demand in exchange for the fasces.

Lu glowered like an angry water buffalo. 'You're sure?'

'I'm afraid so. He guards immortality, so –'

'He expects a sacrifice of immortality.'

The words hung in the air like cigar smoke – cloying and suffocating. This was what all my trials had led to – this choice. This was why Python had been laughing at me for months in my dreams. Nero had made the cost of his destruction giving up the one thing I wanted most. To destroy him, I'd have to forfeit my own godhood forever.

Lu scratched her chin with her fork hand. 'We must help Meg, whatever the cost.'

'Agreed.'

She nodded grimly. ‘Okay, then that’s what we’ll do.’

I swallowed the coppery taste in my mouth. I was ready to pay the price. If it meant freeing Meg from the Beast, freeing the world, freeing Delphi … then I would. But it would’ve been nice if Lu had protested just a little on my behalf. *Oh, no, Apollo! You can’t!*

I suppose our relationship was past the point of sugarcoating, though. Lu was too practical for that. She was the sort of woman who didn’t whine about getting her hands cut off. She just taped silverware to her stumps and got on with business. She wasn’t going to give me a pat on the back for doing the right thing, however painful it was.

Still … I wondered if I was missing something. I wondered if we were *really* on the same page. Lu had a faraway look in her eyes, like she was calculating losses on a battlefield.

Maybe what I sensed was her worry about Meg.

We both knew that, under most circumstances, Meg was fully capable of rescuing herself. But with Nero … I suspected Lu, like me, *wanted* Meg to be strong enough to save herself. We couldn’t make the hard choices for her. Yet it was excruciating to stand by while Meg’s sense of independence was tested. Lu and I were like nervous parents leaving our child at school for the first day of kindergarten … except in this case the kindergarten teacher was a homicidal megalomaniac emperor. Call us crazy, but we didn’t trust what Meg might learn in that classroom.

Lu met my eyes one last time. I imagined her packing away her doubts and fears in her mental saddlebags for later, when she had time for them, along with her cucumber-and-cream-cheese sandwiches.

‘Let’s get to work,’ she told me.

It wasn’t long before we heard the hallway door bang open and heavy footsteps approaching the cell.

‘Look casual,’ Lu ordered, reclining on her couch.

I leaned against the wall and whistled the tune to ‘Maneater’. Gunther appeared, a batch of neon-yellow zip-tie restraints in his hand.

I pointed a finger gun at him. ‘Hey, what’s up?’

He scowled. Then he looked at Lu with her new silverware attachments, and his face split into a grin. ‘What are *you* supposed to be? HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!’

Lu raised her fork and knife. ‘Thought I’d carve you up like the turkey you are.’

Gunther started to giggle, which was disturbing in a man of his size. ‘Stupid Lu. You have fork-and-knife hands … HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!’ He tossed the zip-ties through the cell’s bars. ‘You, ugly boy, tie her arms behind her back. Then I tie you.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think so.’

His mirth dissipated like foam on skink soup. ‘What you say?’

‘You want to tie us up,’ I said very slowly, ‘you’ll have to do it yourself.’

He frowned, trying to make sense of the fact that a teenaged boy was telling him what to do. Clearly, he’d never had children.

‘I will call other guards.’

Lu snorted. ‘You do that. Can’t handle us yourself. I’m too dangerous.’ She held up her knife hand in what could have been taken as a rude gesture.

Gunther’s face turned a mottled red. ‘You’re not the boss of me no more, Luguselwa.’

‘*Not the boss of me* ,’ Lu mimicked. ‘Go on, get help. Tell them you couldn’t tie up a weakling boy and a no-handed woman by yourself. Or come in here, and I will tie *you* up.’

Her plan depended on Gunther taking the bait. He needed to come inside. With his barbarian manhood in question, and his honour insulted by a rude piece of silverware, he did not disappoint. The middle bars of the cell retracted into the floor. Gunther strode through. He

didn’t notice the salve I’d slathered across the threshold – and let me assure you, Will Solace’s burn ointment is slippery stuff.

I’d been wondering which direction Gunther might fall. Turns out, backwards. His heel shot out from under him, his legs crumpled, and his head slammed hard against the marble floor, leaving him flat on his back and groaning halfway inside the cell.

‘Now!’ Lu yelled.

I charged the door.

Lu had told me that the cell bars were motion sensitive. They snapped upward, determined to stop my escape, but they had not been designed to compensate for the weight of a Germanus lying across the threshold.

The bars smashed Gunther against the ceiling like a hyperactive forklift, then lowered him again, their hidden mechanisms whirring and creaking in protest. Gunther gurgled in pain. His eyes crossed. His armor was thoroughly crushed. His ribs probably weren’t in much better shape, but at least the bars hadn’t gone straight through him. I did not want to witness that kind of mess, nor step through it.

‘Get his sword,’ Lu ordered.

I did. Then, using Gunther’s body as a bridge across the slippery salve, we escaped into the hall, the eye of the security camera watching as we fled.

‘Here.’ Lu gestured to what appeared to be a closet door.

I kicked it in, realizing only afterwards that 1) I had no idea why, and 2) I trusted Lu enough not to ask.

Inside were shelves stacked with personal possessions – packs, clothes, weapons, shields. I wondered what unfortunate prisoners they had once belonged to. Leaning against a back corner were my bow and quivers.

‘Aha!’ I grabbed them. With amazement, I drew the Arrow of Dodona from my otherwise empty quivers. ‘Thank the

gods. How are you still here?'

THOU ART PLEASED TO SEE ME, the arrow noted.

'Well, I thought the emperor would have taken you. Or turned you into kindling!'

NERO IS NOT WORTH A FIG, said the arrow. *HE SEES NOT MY BRILLIANCE.*

Somewhere down the hall, an alarm began to blare. The overhead lighting changed from white to red.

'Could you talk with your projectile later?' Lu suggested. 'We have to move!'

'Right,' I said. 'Which way to the fasces?'

'Left,' Lu said. 'So you go right.'

'Wait, what? You said it's left.'

'Right.'

'Right?'

ODS BODKINS! The arrow vibrated in my hand. *JUST LISTEN TO THE GAUL!*

'*I'm* going after the fasces,' Lu explained. '*You're* going to find Meg.'

'But …' My head spun. Was this a trick? Hadn't we agreed? I was ready for my close-up, my big heroic sacrifice. 'The leontocephaline demands immortality for immortality. I have to –'

'I've got it covered,' Lu said. 'Don't worry. Besides, we Celts lost most of our gods long ago. I'm not going to stand by while another deity dies.'

'But you're not –'

I stopped myself. I was about to say *immortal* . Then I considered how many centuries Lu had been alive. Would the leontocephaline accept her life as payment?

My eyes filled with tears. 'No,' I said. 'Meg can't lose you.'

Lu snorted. 'I won't get myself killed if I can help it. I have a plan, but you need to move. Meg is in danger. Her room is six floors up. Southeast corner. Follow the stairs at the end of the hall.'

I started to protest, but the Arrow of Dodona buzzed in warning. I needed to trust Lu. I needed to cede the battle to the better warrior.

'Fine,' I relented. 'Can I at least tape a sword to your arm?'

'No time,' she said. 'Too unwieldy. Wait, actually. That dagger over there. Unsheathe it and put the blade between my teeth.'

'How will that help?'

'Probably won't,' she admitted. 'But it'll look cool.'

I did as she asked.

Now she stood before me as LuBeard the Pirate, cutlery-wielding terror of the Seven Seas.

'Ood ruhk,' she mumbled around the blade. Then she turned and raced away.

'What just happened?' I asked.

THOU HAST MADE A FRIEND, the arrow said. *NOW REFILLEST THY QUIVERS SO THOU SHALT NOT SHOOT WITH ME.*

'Right.' With shaky hands, I scavenged as many intact arrows as I could find in the prisoners' storeroom and added them to my arsenal. Alarms kept blaring. The blood-red light was not helping my anxiety level.

I started down the hall. I'd barely made it halfway when the Arrow of Dodona buzzed, *LOOK OUT!*

A mortal security guard in tactical riot gear rounded the corner, barrelling towards me with his handgun raised. Not being well prepared, I screamed and threw Gunther's sword at him. By some miracle, the hilt hit him in the face and knocked him down.

THAT IS NOT NORMALLY HOW ONE USETH A SWORD, the arrow said.

'Always a critic,' I grumbled.

MEG IS IN PERIL, he said.

'Meg is in peril,' I agreed. I stepped over the mortal guard, now curled on the floor and groaning. 'Terribly

sorry.’ I kicked him in the face. He stopped moving and began to snore. I ran on.

I burst into the stairwell and took the concrete steps two at a time. The Arrow of Dodona remained clutched in my hand. I probably should have put it away and readied my bow with normal missiles, but to my surprise I found that its running Shakespearean commentary boosted my shaky morale.

From the floor above me, two Germani rushed into the stairwell and charged me with spears levelled.

Now lacking even Gunther’s sword, I thrust out my free hand, shut my eyes and screamed as if this would make them go away, or at least make my death less painful.

My fingers burned. Flames roared. The two Germani yelled in terror, then were silent.

When I opened my eyes, my hand was smoking but unharmed. Flames licked at the peeling paint on the walls. On the steps above me were two piles of ash where the Germani had been.

THOU SHOULDST DO THAT MORE OFTEN, the arrow advised.

The idea made me sick to my stomach. Once, I would have been delighted to summon the power to blowtorch my enemies. But now, after knowing Lu, I wondered how many of these Germani really wanted to serve Nero, and how many had been conscripted into his service with no choice. Enough people had died. My grudge was with only one person, Nero, and one reptile, Python.

HURRY, the arrow said with new urgency. *I SENSE … YES. NERO HAS SENT GUARDS TO FETCH MEG.*

I wasn’t sure how it had gleaned this information – if it was monitoring the building’s security system or eavesdropping on Nero’s personal psychic hotline – but the news made me clench my teeth.

‘There will be no Meg-fetching on my watch,’ I growled.

I slid the Arrow of Dodona into one of my quivers and drew a missile of the non-Shakespearean variety.

I bounded up the stairs.

I worried about Luguselwa, who must have been facing the leontocephaline by now. I worried about Nico, Will and Rachel, whom I hadn't seen any sign of in my dreams. I worried about the forces of Camp Half-Blood, who might be charging into a suicidal rescue mission at this very moment. Most of all, I worried about Meg.

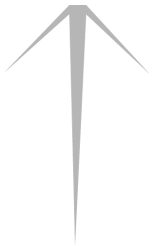
To find her, I would fight the entire tower by myself if I had to.

I reached the next landing. Had Lu said five floors up? Six? How many had I already climbed? Argh, I hated numbers!

I shouldered my way into another bland white corridor and ran in the direction I thought might be southeast.

I kicked open a door and discovered (try not to be too shocked) that I was in the entirely wrong place. A large control room glowed with dozens of monitors. Many showed live feeds of huge metal reservoirs – the emperor's Greek-fire vats. Mortal technicians turned and gawked at me. Germani looked up and frowned. A Germanus who must have been the commander, judging from the quality of his armour and the number of shiny beads in his beard, scowled at me with disdain.

'You heard the emperor's order,' he snarled at the technicians. 'Light those fires *NOW.* And, guards, kill this fool.'



25

Beware, tech support!
Don’t press the naughty button!
Welp. Now you did it.

HOW MANY TIMES HAD I SAID THOSE words? *Kill this fool.*

We gods bandied about statements like that all the time, but we never gave thought to the cost. Like, actual fools may *die* . And in this situation, that fool was me.

A millisecond’s scan of the room showed me ten enemies in various states of readiness. In the far corner, four Germani were scrunched together on a broken-down sofa, eating Chinese food from takeaway boxes. Three technicians sat in swivel chairs, manning control consoles. They were human security, each with a sidearm, but they were too focused on their work to be an immediate threat. A mortal guard stood right next to me, looking surprised that I’d just pushed through the door he was monitoring. Oh, hello! A second guard stood across the room, blocking the other exit. That left just the Germanus leader, who was now rising from his chair, drawing his sword.

So many questions flashed through my mind.

What did the mortal technicians see through the Mist?

How would I get out of here alive?

How did Leader Guy sit comfortably in that swivel chair while wearing a sword?

Was that lemon chicken I smelled, and was there enough for me?

I was tempted to say, *Wrong room* , close the door and beat it down the hall. But since the technicians had just been ordered to burn down the city, that wasn't an option.

'STOP!' I sang out of instinct. 'IN THE NAME OF LOVE!'

Everyone froze – maybe because my voice had magic powers, or maybe because I was horribly off-key. I bow-punched the guy next to me in the face. If you have never been punched by a fist holding a bow, I do not recommend it. The experience is like being hit with brass knuckles, except it hurts the archer's fingers much more. Door Guy #1 went down.

Across the room, Door Guy #2 raised his gun and fired. The bullet sparked off the door next to my head.

Fun fact from a former god who knows acoustics: if you fire a gun in an enclosed space, you have just deafened everyone in that room. The technicians flinched and covered their ears. The Germani's Chinese-takeaway boxes went flying. Even Leader Guy stumbled half out of his chair.

My ears ringing, I drew my bow and shot two arrows at once – the first knocking the gun out of Door Guy #2's hand, the second pinning his sleeve to the wall. Yes, this ex-archery god still had some moves!

The technicians returned their attention to their controls. The Chinese-food contingent tried to extract themselves from their sofa. Leader Guy charged me, his sword in both hands, pointed directly at my soft underbelly.

'Ha-ha!' I initiated a home-plate slide. In my mind, the manoeuvre had seemed so simple: I would glide effortlessly across the floor, avoiding Leader Guy's thrust, veering between his legs as I fired at multiple targets from a supine

position. If Orlando Bloom could do it in *Lord of the Rings* , why couldn't I?

I neglected to consider that this floor was carpeted. I fell flat on my back and Leader Guy tripped over me, barrelling headfirst into the wall.

I did get off one shot – an arrow that skimmed across the nearest technician's control panel and knocked him out of his chair in surprise. I rolled aside as Leader Guy turned and hacked at me. Having no time to nock another arrow, I pulled one out and jabbed it into his shin.

Leader Guy howled. I scrambled to my feet and jumped onto the bank of control consoles.

'Back off!' I yelled at the technicians, doing my best to aim one arrow at all three of them.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Food Four were fumbling with their swords. Door Guy #2 had tugged his sleeve free of the wall and was hunting around for his pistol.

One of the technicians reached for his gun.

'NOPE!' I fired a warning arrow, impaling the seat of his chair a millimetre from his crotch. I was loath to harm hapless mortals (wow, I really wrote that sentence), but I had to keep these guys away from the naughty buttons that would destroy New York.

I nocked three more arrows at once and did my best to look threatening. 'Get out of here! Go!'

The technicians looked tempted – it was, after all, a very fair offer – but their fear of me was apparently not as great as their fear of the Germani.

Still growling in pain from the arrow in his leg, Leader Guy yelled, 'Do your job!'

The technicians lunged towards their naughty buttons. The four Germani charged me.

'Sorry, guys.' I split my arrows, shooting each technician in the foot, which I hoped would keep them distracted long enough for me to deal with the Germani.

I blasted the closest barbarian into dust with an arrow to the chest, but the other three kept coming. I leaped into their midst: bow-punching, elbow-jabbing, arrow-poking like a maniac. With another lucky shot, I took down a second Chinese-food eater, then wrestled free long enough to throw a chair at Door Guy #2, who had just located his gun. One of the metal legs knocked him out cold.

Two lemon-chicken-splattered Germani remained. As they charged, I ran between them with my bow horizontal, at face level, smacking them each in the nose. They staggered back as I fired two more shots, point-blank. It wasn't very sporting, but it *was* effective. The Germani collapsed into piles of dust and sticky rice.

I was feeling pretty smug … until someone hit me in the back of the head. The room went red and purple. I crumpled to my hands and knees, rolled over to defend myself and found Leader Guy standing over me, the tip of his sword in my face.

'Enough,' he snarled. His leg was soaked in blood, my arrow still stuck through his shin like a Halloween gag. He barked at the technicians, 'START THOSE PUMPS!'

In a last desperate attempt to intervene, I sang, 'DON'T DO ME LIKE THAT!' in a voice that would have made Tom Petty cringe.

Leader Guy dug his sword point into my Adam's apple. 'Sing one more word and I will cut out your vocal cords.'

I frantically tried to think of more tricks I could pull. I'd been doing so well. I couldn't give up now. But lying on the floor, exhausted and battered and buzzing from adrenalin burnout, my head started to spin. My vision doubled. Two Leader Guys floated above me. Six blurry technicians with arrows in their shoes limped back to their control panels.

'What's the hold-up?' yelled Leader Guy.

'W-we're trying, sir,' said one of the techs. 'The controls aren't … I can't get any readings.'

Both of Leader Guy's blurry faces glared down at me. 'I'm glad you're not dead yet. Because I'm going to kill you *slowly* .'

Strangely, I felt elated. I may even have grinned. Had I somehow short-circuited the control panels when I stomped across them? Cool! I might die, but I had saved New York!

'Try unplugging it,' said the second tech. 'Then plug it back in.'

Clearly, he was the senior troubleshooter for 1-555-ASK-EVIL.

Tech #3 crawled under the table and rummaged with cords.

'It won't work!' I croaked. 'Your diabolical plan has been foiled!'

'No, we're good now,' announced Tech #1. 'Readings are nominal.' He turned to Leader Guy. 'Shall I –?'

'WHY ARE YOU EVEN ASKING?' Leader Guy bellowed. 'DO IT!'

'No!' I wailed.

Leader Guy dug his sword point a little deeper into my throat, but not enough to kill. Apparently, he was serious about wanting a slow death for me.

The technicians punched their naughty buttons. They stared at the video monitors expectantly. I said a silent prayer, hoping the New York metropolitan area would forgive me my latest, most horrible failure.

The techs fiddled with buttons some more.

'Everything looks normal,' said Tech #1, in a puzzled tone that indicated everything did *not* look normal.

'I don't see anything happening,' said Leader Guy, scanning the monitors. 'Why aren't there flames? Explosions?'

'I – I don't understand.' Tech #2 banged his monitor. 'The fuel isn't … It's not going anywhere.'

I couldn't help it. I began to giggle.

Leader Guy kicked me in the face. It hurt so much I had to giggle even harder.

'What did you do to my fire vats?' he demanded. '*What did you do?*'

'Me?' I cackled. My nose felt broken. I was bubbling mucus and blood in a way that must have been extremely attractive. 'Nothing!'

I laughed at him. It was just so perfect. The thought of dying here, surrounded by Chinese food and barbarians, seemed absolutely perfect. Either Nero's doomsday machines had malfunctioned all by themselves, I had done more damage to the controls than I'd realized, or somewhere deep beneath the building, something had gone right for a change, and I owed every troglodyte a new hat.

The idea made me laugh hysterically, which hurt a great deal.

Leader Guy spat. 'Now, I kill you.'

He raised his sword … and froze. His face turned pale. His skin began to shrivel. His beard fell out whisker by whisker like dead pine needles. Finally, his skin crumbled away, along with his clothes and flesh, until Leader Guy was nothing but a bleached-white skeleton, holding a sword in his bony hands.

Standing behind him, his hand on the skeleton's shoulder, was Nico di Angelo.

'That's better,' Nico said. 'Now stand down.'

The skeleton obeyed, lowering its sword and stepping away from me.

The technicians whimpered in terror. They were mortals, so I wasn't sure what they *thought* they'd just seen, but it was nothing good.

Nico looked at them. 'Run away.'

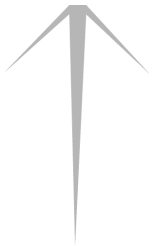
They fell all over each other to comply. They couldn't run very well with arrows in their feet, but they were out of the door faster than you could say, *Holy Hades, that dude just turned Leader Guy into a skeleton.*

Nico frowned down at me. ‘You look awful.’

I laughed weakly, bubbling snot. ‘I know, right?’

My sense of humour didn’t seem to reassure him.

‘Let’s get you out of here,’ Nico said. ‘This whole building is a combat zone, and our job isn’t done.’



26

Tower of fun times.
Giggle with me as we climb.
For Meg! Glory! Hats!

AS NICO HELPED ME TO MY FEET, LEADER Guy collapsed into a pile of bones.

I guess controlling an animated skeleton while hauling my sorry butt off the floor was too much effort even for Nico.

He was surprisingly strong. I had to lean against him with most of my weight since the room was still spinning, my face was throbbing, and I was still suffering from a bout of near-death giggles.

'Where – where's Will?' I asked.

'Not sure.' Nico pulled my arm tighter around his shoulders. 'He suddenly said, "I am needed," and darted off in another direction. We'll find him.' Nico sounded worried nonetheless. 'What about you? How exactly did you … uh, do all this?'

I suppose he was talking about the piles of ash and rice, the broken chairs and control panels, and the blood of my enemies decorating the walls and the carpet. I tried not to laugh like a lunatic. 'Just lucky?'

‘Nobody’s that lucky. I think your godly powers are starting to come back more. Like, a *lot* more.’

‘Yay!’ My knees buckled. ‘Where’s Rachel?’

Nico grunted, trying to keep me on my feet. ‘She was fine last I saw her. She’s the one who sent me here to get you – she’s been having visions like crazy for the last day now. She’s with the trogs.’

‘We have trogs! Whee!’ I leaned my head against Nico’s and sighed contentedly. His hair smelled like rain against stone … a pleasant scent.

‘Are you smelling my head?’ he asked.

‘Um –’

‘Could you not? You’re getting nose blood all over me.’

‘Sorry.’ Then I laughed again.

Wow, I thought distantly. That kick to the face must have rattled my brain loose.

Nico half dragged me down the corridor as he briefed me on their adventures since the trog encampment. I couldn’t concentrate, and I kept giggling at inappropriate moments, but I gleaned that, yes, the trogs had helped them disable the Greek-fire vats; Rachel had managed to summon help from Camp Half-Blood; and Nero’s tower was now the world’s largest urban-warfare play structure.

In return, I told him that Lu now had silverware for hands …

‘Huh?’

She had gone to get Nero’s fasces from a leontocephaline …

‘A *what* -now?’

And I had to get to the southeast corner of the residence wing to find Meg.

That, at least, Nico understood. ‘You’re three floors too low.’

‘I *knew* something was wrong!’

‘It’ll be tough getting you through all the fighting. Every level is, well …’

We'd reached the end of the hallway. He kicked open a door and we stepped into the Conference Room of Calamity.

A half-dozen troglodytes bounced around the room fighting an equal number of mortal security guards. Along with their fine clothing and hats, the trogs all wore thick dark goggles to protect their eyes from the light, so they looked like miniature aviators at a costume party. Some guards were trying to shoot them, but the trogs were small and fast. Even when a bullet hit one of them, it simply glanced off their rock-like skin, making them hiss with annoyance. Other guards had resorted to riot batons, which weren't any more effective. The trogs leaped around the mortals, whacking them with clubs, stealing their helmets and basically having a grand old time.

My old friend Grr-Fred, Mighty of Hats, Corporate Security Chief, leaped from a light fixture, brained a guard, then landed on the conference table and grinned at me. He'd topped his police hat with a new baseball cap that read TRIUMVIRATE HOLD INGS .

'GOOD COMBAT, Lester-Apollo!' He beat his tiny fists against his chest, then ripped a speakerphone from the table and threw it in the face of an oncoming guard.

Nico guided me through the chaos. We ducked through another doorway and ran straight into a Germanus, whom Nico impaled with his Stygian iron blade without even breaking stride.

'The Camp Half-Blood landing zone is just ahead,' he told me as if nothing had happened.

'Landing zone?'

'Yeah. Pretty much everybody came to help.'

'Even Dionysus?' I would've paid real drachma to watch him turn our enemies into grapes and stomp on them. That was *always* good for a laugh.

'Well, no, not Mr D,' Nico said. 'You know how it is. Gods don't fight demigod battles. Present company excepted.'

‘I’m an exception!’ I kissed the top of Nico’s head in delight.

‘Please don’t do that.’

‘Okay! Who else is here? Tell me! Tell me!’ I felt like he was guiding me towards my own birthday party, and I was dying to know the guest list. Also, I felt like I was dying!

‘Um, well …’

We’d arrived at a set of heavy mahogany sliding doors.

Nico dragged one open and the setting sun nearly blinded me. ‘Here we are now.’

A wide terrace ran along the entire side of the building, providing multimillion-dollar views of the Hudson River and New Jersey cliffs beyond, tinged burgundy in the sunset.

The scene on the terrace was even more chaotic than the one in the conference room. Pegasi swooped through the air like giant seagulls, occasionally landing on the deck to unload new demigod reinforcements in orange Camp Half-Blood shirts. Nasty-looking Celestial bronze harpoon turrets lined the rails, but most of them had been blown up or crushed. Lounge chairs were on fire. Our friends from camp were engaged in close-quarters fighting with dozens of Nero’s forces: a few of the older demigod kids from Nero’s Imperial Household, a squad of Germani, mortal security guards and even a few cynocephali – wolf-headed warriors with nasty claws and rabid, slavering mouths.

Against the wall stood a line of potted trees, similar to in the throne room. Their dryads had risen up to fight alongside Camp Half-Blood against Nero’s oppression.

‘Come, sisters!’ cried a ficus spirit, brandishing a pointy stick. ‘We have nothing to lose but our potting soil!’

In the centre of the chaos, Chiron himself clopped back and forth, his white stallion lower half draped with extra quivers, weapons, shields and water bottles, like a combination demigod soccer mom and minivan. He wielded his bow as well as I ever could have (though that comment should be considered strictly off the record) while shouting

encouragement and directions to his young charges. ‘Dennis, try not to kill enemy demigods or mortals! Okay, well, from now on, then! Evette, watch your left flank! Ben – whoa, watch out there, Ben!’

This last comment was directed at a young man in a hand-powered wheelchair, his muscular upper body clad in a racing shirt, his driving gloves studded with spikes. His wild black hair flew in every direction, and as he turned blades jutted from the rims of his wheels, mowing down anyone who dared to get close. His last one-eighty had almost caught Chiron’s back legs, but fortunately the old centaur was nimble.

‘Sorry!’ Ben grinned, seeming not sorry at all, then he wheeled himself straight into a pack of cynocephali.

‘Dad!’ Kayla came racing towards me. ‘Oh, gods, what happened to you? Nico, where’s Will?’

‘That’s a great question,’ Nico said. ‘Kayla, can you take Apollo while I go look?’

‘Yeah, go!’

Nico raced off while Kayla dragged me to the safest corner she could find. She propped me in the only intact chaise longue and began rummaging through her med pack.

I had a lovely view of the sunset and the carnage in progress. I wondered if I could get one of Nero’s servants to bring me a fancy drink decorated with a tiny umbrella. I started to giggle again, though what was left of my common sense whispered, *Stop it. Stop it. This is not funny.*

Kayla frowned, clearly worried by my mirth. She dabbed some menthol-scented healing ointment on my busted nose. ‘Oh, Dad. I’m afraid you’re going to have a scar.’

‘I know.’ I giggled. ‘I’m so glad to see you.’

Kayla managed a weak smile. ‘You, too. Been a crazy afternoon. Nico and those trogs infiltrated the building from below. The rest of us hit the tower on several levels at once, overwhelmed their security. The Hermes cabin

disarmed a lot of the traps and turrets and whatnot, but we've still got fierce fighting pretty much everywhere.'

'Are we winning?' I asked.

A Germanus screamed as Sherman Yang, head counsellor of Ares cabin, threw him off the side of the building.

'Hard to tell,' Kayla said. 'Chiron told the newbies this was a field trip. Like a training exercise. They gotta learn sooner or later.'

I scanned the terrace. Many of those first-time campers, some no older than eleven or twelve, were fighting wide-eyed alongside their cabinmates, trying to imitate whatever their counsellors were doing. They seemed so very young, but, then again, they were demigods. They'd probably already survived numerous terrifying events in their short lives. And Kayla was right – adventures would not wait for them to be ready. They had to jump in, sooner better than later.

'Rosamie!' Chiron called. 'Sword higher, dear!'

The young girl grinned and lifted her blade, intercepting the strike of a security guard's baton. She smacked her foe across the face with the flat of her blade. 'Do we have field trips every week? This is cool!'

Chiron gave her a pained smile, then continued shooting down enemies.

Kayla bandaged my face as best she could – wrapping white gauze around my nose and making me go cross-eyed. I imagined I looked like the Partially Invisible Man, which made me giggle again.

Kayla grimaced. 'Okay, we gotta clear your head. Drink this.' She lifted a vial to my lips.

'Nectar?'

'Definitely *not* nectar.'

The taste exploded in my mouth. Immediately, I realized what she was giving me and why: Mountain Dew, the glowing-lime-green elixir of perfect sobriety. I don't know what effect it has on mortals, but ask any supernatural

entity and they will tell you that Mountain Dew's combination of sweetness, caffeine and otherworldly *je-ne-sais-quoi-peut-être-radioactif* taste is enough to bring complete focus and seriousness to any god. My eyesight cleared. My giddiness evaporated. I had zero desire to giggle. A grim sense of danger and impending death gripped my heart. Mountain Dew is the equivalent of the enslaved servant who would ride behind the emperor during his triumphal parades, whispering, *Remember, you are mortal, and you will die* to keep him from getting a big head.

'Meg,' I said, recalling what was most important. 'I need to find Meg.'

Kayla nodded grimly. 'Then that's what we'll do. I brought you some extra arrows. Thought you might need them.'

'You are the most thoughtful daughter ever.'

She blushed right down to the red roots of her hair. 'Can you walk? Let's get moving.'

We ran inside and turned down a corridor that Kayla thought might lead to the stairwell. We pushed through another set of doors and found ourselves in the Dining Room of Disaster.

Under different circumstances, it might have been a lovely place for a dinner party: a table big enough for twenty guests, a Tiffany chandelier, a huge marble fireplace and wood-panelled walls with niches for marble busts – each depicting the face of the same Roman emperor. (If you guessed Nero, you win a Mountain Dew.)

Not part of the dinner plans: a red forest bull had somehow found its way into the room and was now chasing a group of young demigods around the table while they yelled insults and pelted it with Nero's golden plates, cups and cutlery. The bull didn't seem to realize it could simply smash through the dining table and trample the demigods, but I suspected it would eventually figure that out.

'Ugh, these things,' said Kayla when she saw the bull.

I thought this would make an excellent description in the camp's encyclopedia of monsters. *Ugh, these things* was really all you needed to know about tauri silvestres.

'They can't be killed,' I warned as we joined the other demigods in their game of ring-around-the-dining-table.

'Yeah, I know.' Kayla's tone told me she'd already had a crash course in forest bulls during her field-trip fun. 'Hey, guys,' she said to her young comrades. 'We need to lure this thing outside. If we can trick it off the edge of the terrace –'

At the opposite end of the room, the doors burst open. My son Austin appeared, his tenor sax at the ready. Finding himself right next to the bull's head, he yelped, 'Whoa!' then let loose a dissonant *squeak-blatt* on the sax that would have made Coltrane proud. The bull lurched away, shaking its head in dismay, as Austin vaulted over the dining table and slid to our side.

'Hey, guys,' he said. 'We having fun yet?'

'Austin,' Kayla said with relief. 'I need to lure this bull outside. Can you –?' She pointed at me.

'We playing pass-the-Apollo?' Austin grinned. 'Sure. C'mon, Dad. I got you.'

As Kayla mustered the younger demigods and began shooting arrows to goad the bull into following her, Austin hustled me through a side door.

'Where to, Dad?' He politely did not ask why my nose was bandaged or why my breath smelled of Mountain Dew.

'I have to find Meg,' I said. 'Three stories up? Southeast corner?'

Austin kept jogging with me down the corridor, but his mouth tightened in a thoughtful frown. 'I don't think anybody's managed to fight their way up to that level yet, but let's do it.'

We found a grand circular stairwell that took us up one more floor. We navigated a maze of corridors, then

shouldered through a narrow door into the Hat Room of Horrors.

Troglodytes had found the mother lode of haberdashery. The oversize walk-in closet must have served as Nero's seasonal coat-check area, because fall and winter jackets lined the walls. Shelves overflowed with scarves, gloves and, yes, every conceivable manner of hat and cap. The trogs rifled through the collection with glee, stacking hats six or seven high on their heads, trying on scarves and galoshes to augment their incredibly civilized fashion sense.

One trog looked up at me through his dark goggles, cords of drool hanging from his lips. 'Haaats!'

I could only smile and nod and creep carefully around the edge of the closet, hoping none of the trogs mistook us for chapeau poachers.

Thankfully, the trogs paid us no mind. We emerged from the other side of the closet into a marble foyer with a bank of elevators.

My hopes rose. Assuming this was the main entrance to Nero's residential levels, where his most favoured guests would be received, we were getting closer to Meg.

Austin stopped in front of a keypad with a golden inlaid SPQR symbol. 'Looks like this elevator gives you direct access to the imperial apartments. But we'd need a key card.'

'Stairs?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'This close to the emperor's quarters, I bet any passage up will be locked and booby-trapped. The Hermes cabin swept the lower stairwells, but I doubt they've made it this far. We're the first.' He fingered the pads of his saxophone. 'Maybe I could open the elevator with the right sequence of tones …?'

His voice trailed off as the elevator doors opened by themselves.

Inside stood a young demigod with dishevelled blond hair and rumpled street clothes. Two golden rings gleamed on his middle fingers.

Cassius's eyes widened when he saw me. Clearly, he hadn't been expecting to run into me ever again. He looked like his last twenty-four hours had been almost as bad as mine. His face was grey, his eyes swollen and red from crying. He seemed to have developed a nervous twitch that travelled randomly around his body.

'I –' His voice cracked. 'I didn't want …' His hands trembling, he pulled off Meg's rings and offered them to me. 'Please …'

He looked past me. Clearly, he just wanted to leave, to get out of this tower.

I'll admit I felt a surge of anger. This child had cut off Luguselwa's hands with Meg's own blades. But he was so small and so terrified. He looked like he expected me to turn into the Beast, as Nero would have done, and punish him for what Nero had made him do.

My anger dissolved. I let him drop Meg's rings into my palm. 'Go.'

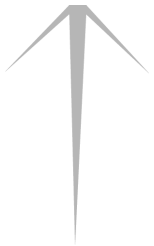
Austin cleared his throat. 'Yeah, but first … how about that key card?' He pointed to a laminated square hanging from a lanyard around Cassius's neck. It looked so much like a school ID that any kid might wear that I hadn't even registered it.

Cassius fumbled to remove it. He handed it to Austin. Then he ran.

Austin tried to read my expression. 'I take it you've met that kid before?'

'Long, bad story,' I said. 'Will it be safe for us to use his elevator pass?'

'Maybe, maybe not,' Austin said. 'Let's find out.'



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Can’t fight in person?
We can videoconference.
I’ll kill you online.

THE WONDERS NEVER CEASED.

The key card worked. The elevator did not incinerate us or drop us to our deaths. Unlike the previous elevator I’d taken, however, this one *did* have background music. We rose smoothly and slowly, as if Nero wanted to give us plenty of time to enjoy it.

I’ve always thought you can judge the quality of a villain by his elevator music. Easy listening? Pedestrian villainy with no imagination. Smooth jazz? Devious villainy with an inferiority complex. Pop hits? Ageing villainy trying desperately to be hip.

Nero had chosen soft classical, as in the lobby. Oh, well played. This was self-assured villainy. Villainy that said *I already own everything and have all the power. Relax. You’re going to die in a minute, so you might as well enjoy this soothing string quartet.*

Next to me, Austin fingered the keys of his saxophone. I could tell he, too, was worried about the soundtrack.

‘Wish it was Miles Davis,’ he said.

‘That would be nice.’

‘Hey, if we don’t get out of this –’

‘None of that talk,’ I chided.

‘Yeah, but I wanted to tell you, I’m glad we had some time together. Like … *time* time.’

His words warmed me even more than Paul Blofis’s lasagne.

I knew what he meant. While I’d been Lester Papadopoulos, I hadn’t spent much time with Austin, or any of the people I’d stayed with, really, but it had been more than we’d *ever* spent together when I was a god. Austin and I had got to know each other – not just as god and mortal, or father and son, but as two people working side by side, helping each other get through our often messed-up lives. That had been a precious gift.

I was tempted to promise we’d do this more often if we survived, but I’d learned that promises are precious. If you’re not absolutely sure you can keep them, you should never make them, much like chocolate chip cookies.

Instead, I smiled and squeezed his shoulder, not trusting myself to speak.

Also, I couldn’t help thinking about Meg. If so little time with Austin had been this meaningful, how could I possibly quantify what my adventures with Meg had meant to me? I’d shared almost my entire journey with that silly, brave, infuriating, wonderful girl. I *had* to find her.

The elevator doors slid open. We stepped into a hallway with a floor mosaic depicting a triumphal procession through a burning New York cityscape. Clearly, Nero had been planning for months, perhaps years, to unleash his inferno no matter what I did. I found this so appalling and so in-character for him, I couldn’t even get angry.

We stopped just before the end of the hall, where it split into a T. From the corridor to the right came the sounds of many voices in conversation, glasses clinking, even some laughter. From the corridor on the left, I heard nothing.

Austin motioned for me to wait. He carefully removed a long brass rod from the body of his sax. He had all sorts of nonstandard attachments on his instrument, including a bag of exploding reeds, tone-hole cleaners that doubled as zip-ties and a stiletto knife for stabbing monsters and unappreciative music critics. The rod he chose now was fitted with a small curved mirror on one end. He edged this into the hallway like a periscope, studied the reflections, then pulled it back.

'Party room on the right,' he whispered in my ear. 'Full of guards, bunch of folks that look like guests. Library on the left, looks empty. If you need to get to the southeast corner to find Meg, you'll have to go straight through that crowd.'

I clenched my fists, ready to do whatever was necessary.

From the party room came the voice of a young woman making an announcement. I thought I recognized the polite and terrified tone of the dryad Areca.

'Thank you all for your patience!' she told the crowd. 'The emperor is just finishing up a few matters in the throne room. And the, ah, minor disruptions on the lower floors will be taken care of very soon. In the meantime, please enjoy cake and beverages while we wait for –' her voice cracked – 'the burning to start.'

The guests gave her a polite smattering of applause.

I readied my bow. I wanted to charge into that crowd, free Areca, shoot everybody else and stomp on their cake. Instead, Austin grabbed my arm and pulled me back a few steps towards the elevator.

'There's too many of them,' he said. 'Let me cause a distraction. I'll draw as many as I can into the library and lead them on a chase. Hopefully that'll clear a path for you to get to Meg.'

I shook my head. 'It's too dangerous. I can't let you –'

'Hey.' Austin smirked. For a moment, I glimpsed my own old godly self-confidence in him – that look that said, *I'm a musician. Trust me.* 'Dangerous is part of the job

description. Let me do this. You hang back until I draw them out. Then go find our girl. I'll see you on the other side.'

Before I could protest, Austin ran to the junction of the corridor and yelled, 'Hey, idiots! You're all gonna *die* !' Then he put his mouthpiece to his lips and blasted out 'Pop Goes the Weasel'.

Even without the insults, that particular song, when played by a child of Apollo, will cause a stampede one hundred percent of the time. I pressed myself against the wall by the elevator as Austin dashed towards the library, pursued by fifty or sixty angry screaming party guests and Germani. I could only hope Austin found a second exit from the library, or else this would be a very short chase.

I forced myself to move. *Find our girl,* Austin had said.

Yes. That was the plan.

I sprinted to the right and into the party room.

Austin had cleared out the place completely. Even Areca seemed to have followed the rampaging 'Pop Goes the Weasel' mob.

Left behind were dozens of high cocktail tables covered in linen, sprinkled with glitter and rose petals, and topped with balsa-wood centrepiece sculptures of Manhattan going up in painted flames. Even for Nero, I found this over the top. The sideboard was loaded with every conceivable party appetizer, plus a multilayered red-and-yellow flame-motif cake. A banner across the back wall read HAPPY INF ERNO!

Along the other wall, plate-glass windows (no doubt heavily insulated) looked over the city, allowing for a beautiful view of the promised firestorm, which now – bless the trogs and their magnificent hats – would not be happening.

In one corner, a small stage had been set up with a single microphone and a stand of instruments: a guitar, a lyre and a violin. Oh, Nero. As a sick joke, he had intended to fiddle

while New York burned. No doubt his guests would have laughed and clapped politely as the city exploded and millions perished to the tune of ‘This Land Is Your Land’. And who were these guests? The emperor’s billionaire golf buddies? Adult demigods who had been recruited for his postapocalyptic empire? Whoever they were, I hoped Austin stampeded them straight into a mob of angry troglodyte shareholders.

It was fortunate no one was left in the room. They would have faced my wrath. As it was, I shot an arrow into the cake, which wasn’t a very satisfying experience.

I marched through the room, and then, impatient with the sheer size of the place, began to jog. At the far end, I kicked through a doorway, my bow drawn and ready, but found only another empty hallway.

I recognized this area from my dreams, though. Finally, I had reached the imperial family’s living area. Where were the guards? The servants? I decided I didn’t care. Just up ahead would be Meg’s door. I ran.

‘Meg!’ I barrelled into her bedroom.

No one was there.

The bed had been perfectly made up with a new comforter. The broken chairs had been replaced. The room smelled of Pine Sol, so even Meg’s scent had been erased along with any sign of her rebellion. I’d never felt so depressed and alone.

‘Hello!’ said a small, tinny voice to my left.

I shot an arrow at the nightstand, cracking the screen of a laptop computer showing Nero’s face on a live video call.

‘Oh, no,’ he said dryly, his image now fractured and pixelated. ‘You got me.’

His image jiggled, too large and off-centre, as if he were holding the camera phone himself and not used to using it. I wondered if the emperor had to worry about cell phones malfunctioning, the way demigods did, or if the phone would broadcast his location to monsters. Then I realized

there was no monster within five hundred miles worse than Nero.

I lowered my bow. I had to unclench my jaw in order to speak. ‘Where is Meg?’

‘Oh, she’s quite well. She’s here with me in the throne room. I imagined you’d stumble in front of that monitor sooner or later, so we could chat about your situation.’

‘*My* situation? You’re under siege. We’ve ruined your inferno party. Your forces are being routed. I’m coming for you now, and, if you so much as touch a rhinestone on Meg’s glasses, I’ll kill you.’

Nero laughed gently, as if he had no concerns in the world. I didn’t catch the first part of his response, because my attention was drawn to a flash of movement in the hallway. Screech-Bling, CEO of the troglodytes, materialized in Meg’s bedroom doorway, grinning with delight, his colonial outfit covered with monster dust and tufts of red bull fur, his tricorn hat topped with several new headwear acquisitions.

Before Screech-Bling could say anything that would announce his presence, I gave him a subtle shake of the head, warning him to stay put, out of range of the laptop camera. I didn’t want to give Nero any more information about our allies than necessary.

It was impossible to read Screech-Bling’s eyes behind his dark goggles, but, being a smart trog, he seemed to understand.

Nero was saying ‘– quite a different situation. Have you heard of Sassanid gas, Apollo?’

I had no idea what that was, but Screech-Bling almost leaped out of his buckle shoes. His lips curled in a distasteful sneer.

‘Ingenious, really,’ Nero continued. ‘The Persians used it against our troops in Syria. Sulphur, bitumen, a few other secret ingredients. Horribly poisonous, causes excruciating

death, especially effective in enclosed spaces like tunnels … or buildings.'

My neck hairs stood on end. 'Nero. No.'

'Oh, I think yes,' he countered, his voice still pleasant. 'You've robbed me of my chance to burn down the city, but surely you didn't think that was my *only* plan. The backup system is quite intact. You've done me the favour of gathering the entire Greek camp in one place! Now, with just a push of a button, everything below the throne room level –'

'Your own people are down here!' I yelled, shaking with fury.

Nero's distorted face looked pained. 'It's unfortunate, yes. But you've forced my hand. At least my darling Meg is here, and some of my other favourites. We will survive. What you don't seem to realize, Apollo, is that you can't destroy bank accounts with a bow and arrows. All my assets, all the power I've built up for centuries – it's all safe. And Python is still waiting for your corpse to be delivered to him. So let's make a deal. I will delay releasing my Sassanid surprise for … say, fifteen minutes. That should be enough time for you to reach the throne room. I'll let in you, and *only* you.'

'And Meg?'

Nero looked baffled. 'As I said, Meg is fine. I would never hurt her.'

'You –' I choked on my rage. 'You do nothing *but* hurt her.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Come on up and we'll have a chat. I'll even …' He paused, then laughed as if he'd had a sudden inspiration. 'I'll even let Meg decide what to do with you! Surely that's more than fair. Your other option is that I release the gas now, then come down and collect your corpse at my leisure, along with those of your friends –'

'No!' I tried to curb the desperation in my voice. 'No, I'm coming up.'

‘Excellent.’ Nero gave me a smug smile. ‘Ta-ta.’

The screen went dark.

I faced Screech-Bling. He stared back, his expression grim.

‘Sassanid gas is very – *GRR* – bad,’ he said. ‘I see why Red Priestess sent me here.’

‘Red – you mean Rachel? She told you to find me?’

Screech-Bling nodded. ‘She sees things, as you said. The future. The worst enemies. The best hats. She told me to come to this place.’

His voice conveyed a level of reverence that suggested Rachel Elizabeth Dare would be getting free skink soup for the rest of her life. I missed my Pythia. I wished she had sought me out herself, rather than sending Screech-Bling, but since the trog could run at supersonic speed and tear through solid rock, I guessed it made sense.

The CEO scowled at the laptop’s dark cracked monitor. ‘Is it possible Ne-*ACK*-ro is bluffing about the gas?’

‘No,’ I said bitterly. ‘Nero doesn’t bluff. He likes to boast, then follow through. He’ll release that gas as soon as he has me in the throne room.’

‘Fifteen minutes,’ Screech-Bling mused. ‘Not much time. Try to stall him. I will gather the trogs. We will disable this gas, or I will see you in Underheaven!’

‘But –’

Screech-Bling vanished in a cloud of dust and bull hair.

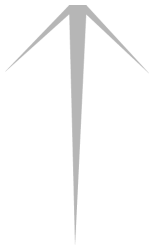
I tried to steady my breathing. The troglodytes had come through for us once before when I didn’t believe they would. Still, we weren’t underground now. Nero would not have told me about his poison-gas delivery system if it was easy to find or disarm. If he could fumigate an entire skyscraper at the touch of a button, I didn’t see how the trogs would have time to stop him, or even get our forces safely out of the building. And, when I faced the emperor, I had no chance of beating him … unless Lu had succeeded

in getting his fasces from the leontocephaline, and that mission also seemed impossible.

On the other hand, I didn’t have much choice but to hope. I had a part to play. Stall Nero. Find Meg.

I marched out of the bedroom.

Fifteen minutes. Then I would end Nero, or he would end me.



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Signs of the end times:
Torches, rolling grapes, neck beards.
Meg gets cleaned up nice.

THE BLAST DOORS WERE A NICE TOUCH.

I'd found my way back to the throne room level with no problem. The elevators cooperated. The halls were eerily quiet. This time, no one greeted me in the antechamber.

Where the ornamental golden doors had stood before, the entrance to Nero's inner sanctum was now sealed by massive panels of titanium and Imperial gold. Hephaestus would have salivated at the sight – so much beautiful metalwork, inscribed with sorcerous charms of protection worthy of Hecate. All to keep one slimy emperor safe in his panic room.

Finding no doorbell, I rapped my knuckles on the titanium: *Shave and a haircut …*

No one gave the proper response, because barbarians. Instead, at the upper left-hand corner of the wall, a security camera light blinked from red to green.

'Good.' Nero's voice crackled from a speaker in the ceiling. 'You're alone. Smart boy.'

I could have got offended by his *boy* comment, but there was so much else to feel offended by that I figured I'd better pace myself. The doors rumbled, parting just enough for me to squeeze through. They closed behind me.

I scanned the room for Meg. She was nowhere in sight, which made me want to smack a Nero.

The room was mostly unchanged. At the foot of Nero's dais, the Persian rugs had been replaced to get rid of those annoying bloodstains from Luguselwa's double amputation. The servants had been cleared out. Forming a semicircle behind Nero's throne were a dozen Germani, some looking like they'd served as target practice for Camp Half-Blood's 'field trip'. Where Lu and Gunther had stood before, at the emperor's right hand, a new Germanus had taken their place. He had a stark white beard, a deep vertical scar on the side of his face and armour stitched from shaggy pelts that would have won him no friends in the animal-rights community.

Rows of Imperial-gold bars had been lowered over all the windows, making the entire throne room feel appropriately like a cage. Enslaved dryads hovered nervously near their potted plants. The children of the Imperial Household – only seven of them, now – stood next to each plant with burning torches in their hands. Since Nero had raised them to be despicable, I supposed they would burn the dryads if I didn't cooperate.

My hand rested against my jeans pocket, where I'd tucked Meg's golden rings. I was relieved that at least she wasn't standing with her siblings. I was glad young Cassius had run away from this place. I wondered where the other three missing adoptees had gone – if they'd been captured or had fallen in battle to Camp Half-Blood. I tried not to feel any satisfaction at the thought, but it was difficult.

'Hello!' Nero sounded genuinely happy to see me. He reclined on his couch, popping grapes in his mouth from a silver platter at his side. 'Weapons on the floor, please.'

‘Where is Meg?’ I demanded.

‘Meg …?’ Nero feigned confusion. He scanned the line of his torch-bearing children. ‘Meg. Let’s see … where did I leave her? Which one is Meg?’

The other demigods gave him forced smiles, perhaps not sure if Dear Old Dad was joking.

‘She’s close,’ Nero assured me, his expression hardening. ‘But, first, weapons on the floor. I am taking no chances that you will harm my daughter.’

‘You –’ I was so angry I couldn’t finish the sentence.

How could someone twist the truth with such brazenness, telling you the exact opposite of what was clear and obvious, and *still* sound like they believed what they were saying? How could you defend against lies that were so blatant and brash they should have required no challenge?

I put down my bow and quivers. I doubted they would matter. Nero wouldn’t have let me into his presence if he thought they were a threat.

‘And the ukulele,’ he said. ‘And the backpack.’

Oh, he was good.

I set these next to my quivers.

I realized that even if I tried something – even if I could throw flames at Nero or shoot him in the face or Apollo-smash his horrible purple love seat – it wouldn’t matter if his fasces was still intact. He looked completely at ease, as if he knew he was invulnerable.

All my bad behaviour would do is hurt others. The dryads would burn. If the demigods refused to burn them, then Nero would have the Germani punish the demigods. And if the Germani hesitated to carry out his orders … Well, after what had happened to Luguselwa, I doubted any of the guards would dare challenge Nero. The emperor held everyone in this room in a web of fear and threats. But what about Meg? She was the only wild card I could hope to play.

As if reading my thoughts, Nero gave me a thin smile.

‘Meg, my dear,’ he called, ‘it’s safe to come forward.’

She appeared from behind one of the columns in the back of the room. Two cynocephali flanked her. The wolf-headed men did not touch her, but they walked beside her in such a tight orbit they reminded me of sheepdogs herding a wayward lamb.

Meg looked physically unhurt, though she’d been bathed to within an inch of her life. All the hard-earned grime, ash and dirt she’d accumulated on her way to the tower had been scrubbed away. Her pageboy haircut had been reshaped in a layered pixie style, parted in the middle, making Meg resemble the dryads a little too closely. And her clothes: gone was Sally Jackson’s valentine dress. In its place, Meg wore a sleeveless purple gown, gathered at the waist by a golden cord. Her red high-tops had been exchanged for gold-corded sandals. The only thing that remained of her old look was her glasses, without which she couldn’t see, but I was surprised Nero had let her keep even those.

My heart broke. Meg looked elegant, older and quite beautiful. She also looked utterly, completely no longer herself. Nero had tried to strip away everything she had been, every choice she’d made, and replace her with someone else – a proper young lady of the Imperial Household.

Her foster siblings watched her approach with undisguised loathing and jealousy.

‘There you are!’ Nero said with delight. ‘Come join me, dear.’

Meg met my eyes. I tried to transmit how concerned and anguished I felt for her, but her expression remained carefully neutral. She made her way towards Nero, each step cautious, as if the slightest false step or betrayal of emotion might cause invisible mines to explode around her.

Nero patted the cushions next to him, but Meg stopped at the base of the dais. I chose to take this as a hopeful sign.

Nero's face tightened with displeasure, but he masked it quickly, no doubt deciding, like the professional abusive villain he was, not to exert more pressure than was necessary, to keep the line taut without breaking it.

'And so here we are!' He spread his arms to take in this special occasion. 'Lester, it's a shame you ruined our fireworks display. We could have been down in the parlour right now with our guests, watching a lovely sunset as the city burned. We could've had canapés and cake. But no matter. We still have so much to celebrate! Meg is home!'

He turned to the white-bearded Germanus. 'Vercorix, bring me the remote control, would you?' He gestured vaguely to the coffee table, where a black lacquered tray was piled with tech gadgets.

Vercorix lumbered over and picked one.

'No, that's for the television,' said Nero. 'No, that's the DVR. Yes, that's the one, I think.'

Panic swelled in my throat as I realized what Nero wanted: the control for releasing his Sassanid gas. Naturally, he would keep it with his TV remotes.

'Stop!' I yelled. 'You said Meg would decide.'

Meg's eyes widened. Apparently, she hadn't heard Nero's plan. She looked back and forth between us, as if worried which of us might attack her first. Watching her inner turmoil made me want to weep.

Nero smirked. 'Well, of course she will! Meg, my dear, you know the situation. Apollo has failed you yet again. His plans are in ruins. He has sacrificed his allies' lives to make it this far –'

'That's not true!' I said.

Nero raised an eyebrow. 'No? When I warned you that this tower was a death trap for your demigod friends, did you rush down to save them? Did you hurry them out of the building? I gave you ample time. No. You *used* them. You let them keep fighting to distract my guards, so you could

sneak up here and try to reclaim your precious immortality.'

'I – What? I didn't –'

Nero swept his fruit platter off the sofa. It clattered across the floor. Grapes rolled everywhere. Everyone in the throne room flinched, including me … and this was obviously Nero's intention. He was a master at theatrics. He knew how to work a crowd, keep us on our toes.

He invested his voice with so much righteous indignation, even *I* wondered if I should believe him. 'You are a user, Apollo! You always have been. You leave a wake of ruined lives wherever you go. Hyacinthus. Daphne. Marsyas. Koronis. And your own Oracles: Trophonius, Herophile, the Cumaean Sibyl.' He turned to Meg. 'You've *seen* this with your own eyes, my dear. You know what I mean. Oh, Lester, I've been living among mortals for thousands of years. You know how many lives I've destroyed? None! I've raised a family of orphans.' He gestured at his adopted children, some of whom winced as if he might throw a platter of grapes at them. 'I've given them luxury, security, love! I've employed thousands. I've improved the world! But you, Apollo, you've been on Earth barely six months. How many lives have you wrecked in that time? How many have died trying to defend you? That poor griffin, Heloise. The dryad, Money Maker. Crest the pandos. And, of course, Jason Grace.'

'Don't you *dare* ,' I snarled.

Nero spread his hands. 'Should I go on? The deaths at Camp Jupiter: Don, Dakota. The parents of that poor little girl Julia. All for what? Because *you* want to be a god again. You've whined and complained across this country and back again. So I ask you: are you *worthy* of being a god?'

He had done his homework. It wasn't like Nero to remember the names of so many people he didn't care about. But this was an important scene. He was putting on a performance for all of us, especially Meg.

‘You’re twisting everything into lies!’ I said. ‘Just like you always have for Meg and your other poor children.’

I shouldn’t have called them *poor* . The seven torchbearers glared at me with disdain. Clearly, they didn’t want my pity. Meg’s expression remained blank, but her eyes slid away from me and fixed on the patterns in the carpet. That probably wasn’t a good sign.

Nero chuckled. ‘Oh, Apollo, Apollo … You want to lecture *me* about my *poor children* ? How have you treated yours?’

He began rattling off a list of my parenting failures, which were many, but I only half listened.

I wondered how much time had passed since I’d seen Screech-Bling. How long could I keep Nero talking, and would it be enough for the trogs to disable the poison gas, or at least clear the building?

Whatever the case, with those blast doors sealed and the windows barred, Meg and I were on our own. We would have to save each other, because no one else would. I had to believe we were still a team.

‘And even now,’ Nero continued, ‘your children are fighting and dying below, while you are here.’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘I tell you what. Let’s set aside the issue of fumigating my tower for the moment.’ He placed the remote control next to him on the sofa, somehow making it seem like an incredibly generous concession that he would wait a few more minutes before gassing all my friends to death.

He turned to Meg. ‘My dear, you can choose, as I promised. Which of our nature spirits should have the honour of killing this pathetic former god? We will make him fight his own battle for once.’

Meg stared at Nero as if he’d just spoken backwards. ‘I … I can’t …’

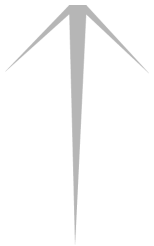
She wrung her fingers where her gold rings used to be. I wanted to give them back to her so badly, but I was afraid even to breathe. Meg seemed to be teetering on the edge of

an abyss. I feared any change in the room – the slightest vibration in the floor, a shift in the light, a cough or a sigh – might push her over.

'You can't choose?' Nero asked, his voice dripping with sympathy. 'I understand. We have so many dryads here, and they all deserve vengeance. After all, their species has only one natural predator: the Olympian gods.' He scowled at me. 'Meg is right! We will not choose. Apollo, in the name of Daphne, and all the other dryads whom you have tormented over the centuries … I decree that *all* our dryad friends will be allowed to tear you apart. Let's see how you defend yourself when you don't have any demigods to hide behind!'

He snapped his fingers. The dryads didn't seem too excited about tearing me apart, but the children of the Imperial Household held their torches closer to their potted trees, and something in the dryads seemed to break, flooding them with desperation, horror and rage.

They may have preferred to attack Nero, but since they couldn't, they did what he asked. They attacked me.



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When you're burning trees
And it's allergy season,
Expect some sniffles.

IF THEIR HEARTS HAD BEEN IN IT, I WOULD have died.

I've seen actual mobs of bloodthirsty dryads attack. It's not something any mortal could live through. These tree spirits seemed more interested in just playing the part. They staggered towards me, yelling *RAWR* , while occasionally glancing over their shoulders to make sure the torch-bearing demigods hadn't set fire to their life sources.

I dodged the first two palm-tree spirits who lunged at me.

'I won't fight you!' I yelled. A sturdy ficus jumped on me from behind, forcing me to throw her off. 'We're not enemies!'

A fiddle-leaf fig was hanging back, perhaps waiting for her turn to get me, or just hoping she wouldn't get noticed. Her demigod keeper noticed, though. He lowered his torch and the fig tree went up in flames as if it had been doused in oil. The dryad screamed and combusted, collapsing in a heap of ash.

‘Stop it!’ Meg said, but her voice was so fragile it barely registered.

The other dryads attacked me in earnest. Their fingernails stretched into talons. A lemon tree sprouted thorns all over her body and tackled me in a painful hug.

‘Stop it!’ Meg said, louder this time.

‘Oh, let them try, my dear,’ Nero said, as the trees piled onto my back. ‘They deserve their revenge.’

The ficus got me in a chokehold. My knees buckled under the weight of six dryads. Thorns and talons raked every bit of exposed skin. I croaked, ‘Meg!’

My eyes bulged. My vision blurred.

‘STOP!’ Meg ordered.

The dryads stopped. The ficus sobbed with relief and released her hold around my neck. The others backed off, leaving me on my hands and knees, gasping, bruised and bleeding.

Meg ran to me. She knelt and put her hand on my shoulder, studying my scrapes and cuts and my ruined, bandaged nose with an agonized expression. I would have been overjoyed to get this attention from her if we hadn’t been in the middle of Nero’s throne room, or if I could just, you know, breathe.

Her first whispered question was not the one I’d been expecting: ‘Is Lu alive?’

I nodded, blinking away tears of pain. ‘Last I saw,’ I whispered back. ‘Still fighting.’

Meg’s brow furrowed. For the moment, her old spirit seemed rekindled, but it was difficult to visualize her the way she used to be. I had to concentrate on her eyes, framed by her wonderfully horrible cat-eye glasses, and ignore the new wispy haircut, the smell of lilac perfume, the purple gown and gold sandals and – OH, GODS! – someone had given her a pedicure.

I tried to contain my horror. ‘Meg,’ I said. ‘There’s only one person here you need to listen to: yourself. Trust

yourself.’

I meant it, despite all my doubts and fears, despite all my complaints over the months about Meg being my master. She had chosen me, but I had also chosen her. I *did* trust her – not in spite of her past with Nero, but because of it. I had seen her struggle. I’d admired her hard-won progress. I had to believe in her for my own sake. She was – gods help me – my role model.

I pulled her gold rings from my pocket. She recoiled when she saw them, but I pressed them into her hands. ‘You are stronger than he is.’

If I could have just kept her looking nowhere but at me, perhaps we could’ve survived in a small bubble of our old friendship, even surrounded by Nero’s toxic environment.

But Nero couldn’t allow that.

‘Oh, my dear.’ He sighed. ‘I appreciate your kind heart. I do! But we can’t interfere with justice.’

Meg stood and faced him. ‘This isn’t justice.’

His smile thinned. He glanced at me with a mixture of humour and pity, as if saying, *Now look what you’ve done.*

‘Perhaps you’re right, Meg,’ he conceded. ‘These dryads don’t have the courage or the spirit to do what’s necessary.’

Meg stiffened, apparently realizing what Nero intended to do. ‘No.’

‘We will have to try something else.’ He gestured to the demigods, who lowered their torches into the plants.

‘NO!’ Meg screamed.

The room turned green. A storm of allergens exploded from Meg’s body, as if she’d released an entire season of oak pollen in a single blast. Verdant dust coated the throne room – Nero, his couch, his guards, his rugs, his windows, his children. The demigods’ torch flames spluttered and died.

The dryads’ trees began to grow, roots breaking through their pots and anchoring to the floor, new leaves unfurling to replace the singed ones, branches thickening and

stretching out, threatening to entangle their demigod minders. Not being complete fools, Nero's children scrambled away from their newly aggressive houseplants.

Meg turned to the dryads. They were huddled together trembling, burn marks steaming on their arms. 'Go heal,' she told them. 'I'll keep you safe.'

With a grateful collective sob, they vanished.

Nero calmly brushed the pollen from his face and clothes. His Germani seemed unperturbed, as if this sort of thing happened a lot. One of the cynocephali sneezed. His wolf-headed comrade offered him a Kleenex.

'My dear Meg,' Nero said, his voice even, 'we've talked about this before. You must control yourself.'

Meg clenched her fists. 'You didn't have the right. It wasn't fair –'

'Now, Meg.' His voice hardened, letting her know that his patience was strained. 'Apollo might still be allowed to live, if that's really what you want. We don't *have* to surrender him to Python. But, if we're going to take that kind of risk, I'll need you at my side with your wonderful powers. *Be* my daughter again. Let me save him for you.'

She said nothing. Her stance radiated stubbornness. I imagined her putting down her own roots, mooring herself in place.

Nero sighed. 'Everything becomes much, much harder when you wake the Beast. You don't want to make the wrong choice again, do you? And lose someone else like you lost your father?' He gestured to his dozen pollen-covered Germani, his pair of cynocephali, his seven demigod foster children – all of whom glared at us as if they, unlike the dryads, would be quite happy to tear us to pieces.

I wondered how quickly I could retrieve my bow, though I was in no shape for combat. I wondered how many opponents Meg could handle with her scimitars. Good as she was, I doubted she could fend off twenty-one. Then

there was Nero himself, who had the constitution of a minor god. Despite her anger, Meg couldn't seem to make herself look him in the face.

I imagined Meg making these same calculations, perhaps deciding that there was no hope, that the only possibility of sparing my life was to give in to Nero.

'I didn't kill my father,' she said, her voice small and hard. 'I didn't cut off Lu's hands or enslave those dryads or twist us all up inside.' She swept a hand towards the other demigods of the household. '*You* did that, Nero. I hate you.'

The emperor's expression turned sad and weary. 'I see. Well … if you feel that way –'

'It's not about *feelings* ,' Meg snapped. 'It's about the truth. I'm not listening to you. And I'm not using *your* weapons to fight my fights any more.'

She tossed her rings away.

A small desperate yelp escaped my throat.

Nero chuckled. 'That, my dear, was foolish.'

For once, I was tempted to agree with the emperor. No matter how good my young friend was with gourds and pollen, no matter how glad I was to have her at my side, I couldn't imagine us getting out of this room alive unarmed.

The Germani hefted their spears. The imperial demigods drew their swords. The wolf-headed warriors snarled.

Nero raised his hand, ready to give the kill command, when behind me a mighty *BOOM!* shook the chamber. Half our enemies were thrown off their feet. Cracks sprouted in the windows and the marble columns. Ceiling tiles broke, raining dust like split bags of flour.

I turned to see the impenetrable blast doors lying twisted and broken, a strangely emaciated red bull standing in the breach. Behind it stood Nico di Angelo.

Safe to say, I had not been expecting this kind of party-crasher.

Clearly, Nero and his followers hadn't, either. They stared in amazement as the taurus silvestris lumbered across the threshold. Where the bull's blue eyes should have been, there were only dark holes. Its shaggy red hide hung loosely over its reanimated skeleton like a blanket. It was an undead thing with no flesh or soul – just the will of its master.

Nico scanned the room. He looked worse than the last time I'd seen him. His face was covered in soot, his left eye swollen shut. His shirt was ripped to shreds, and his black sword dripped with some sort of monster blood. Worst of all, someone (I'm guessing a trog) had forced him to wear a white cowboy hat. I half expected him to say *yee-haw* in the most unenthusiastic voice ever.

For the benefit of his skeleton bull, he pointed at Nero and said, 'Kill that one.'

The bull charged. The followers of Nero went crazy. Germani rushed the creature like linebackers going after a wide receiver, desperate to stop it before it reached the dais. The cynocephali howled and bounded in our direction. The imperial demigods faltered, looking at each other for direction like, *Who do we attack? The bull? The emo kid? Dad? Each other?* (This is the problem when you raise your children to be paranoid murderers.)

'Vercorix!' Nero shrieked, his voice a half-octave higher than usual. He leaped onto his couch, madly punching buttons on his Sassanid gas remote control and apparently deciding that it was *not* , in fact, his Sassanid gas remote control. 'Bring me the other controls! Hurry!'

Halfway to the bull, Vercorix stumbled and reversed course for the coffee table, perhaps wondering why he'd taken this promotion and why Nero couldn't fetch his own stupid remotes.

Meg tugged at my arm, shaking me from my stupor. 'Get up!'

She dragged me out of the path of a cynocephalus, who landed next to us on all fours, snarling and slavering. Before I could decide whether to fight him with my bare hands or my bad breath, Nico leaped between us, his sword already in motion. He slashed the wolf-man into dust and dog fur.

'Hey, guys.' Nico's swollen eye made him look even fiercer than usual. 'You should probably find some weapons.'

I tried to remember how to speak. 'How did you –? Wait, let me guess. Rachel sent you.'

'Yup.'

Our reunion was interrupted by the second wolf-headed warrior, who loped towards us more cautiously than his fallen comrade, edging sideways and looking for an opening. Nico fended him off with his sword and his scary cowboy hat, but I had a feeling we'd be getting more company soon.

Nero himself was still screaming on his sofa while Vercorix fumbled with the tray of remote controls. A few feet away from us, the Germani were piling on top of the skeleton bull. Some of the imperial demigods ran to help them, but three of the more devious members of the family were hanging back, eyeing us, no doubt pondering the best way to kill us so they could get a gold star from Daddy on their weekly chore chart.

'What about the Sassanid gas?' I asked Nico.

'Trogs still working on that.'

I muttered a curse that would not have been appropriate for the ears of a youngster like Meg, except that Meg had taught me this particular curse.

'Has Camp Half-Blood evacuated?' Meg asked. I was relieved to hear her join the conversation. It made me feel like she was still one of us.

Nico shook his head. 'No. They're fighting against Nero's forces on every floor. We warned everyone about the gas,

but they won’t leave until you guys leave.’

I felt a surge of gratitude and exasperation. Those stupid, beautiful Greek demigods, those brave, wonderful fools. I wanted to punch them all and then give them a big hug.

The cynocephalus lunged.

‘Go!’ Nico told us.

I sprinted towards the entrance where I’d dropped my supplies, Meg right beside me.

A Germanus flew overhead, kicked into oblivion by the bull. The zombie monster was about twenty feet from the emperor’s dais now, struggling to make it to the goal line, but it was losing momentum under the weight of a dozen bodies. The three devious demigods were now prowling in our direction, paralleling our course towards the front of the room.

By the time I reached my possessions, I was gasping and sweating like I’d just run a marathon. I scooped up my ukulele, nocked an arrow in my bow and aimed at the approaching demigods, but two of them had disappeared. Perhaps they’d taken cover behind the columns? I fired at the only demigod still visible – Aemillia, was it? – but either I was weak and slow, or she was exceptionally well trained. She dodged my shot and kept coming.

‘What about weapons for you?’ I asked Meg, nocking another arrow.

She chin-pointed towards her foster sibling. ‘I’ll take hers. You concentrate on Nero.’

Off she ran in her silk dress and sandals like she was about to lay waste to a black-tie event.

Nico was still duelling with the wolf-dude. The zombie bull finally collapsed under the weight of Team Nero, meaning it wouldn’t be long before the Germani came looking for new targets to tackle.

Vercorix tripped and fell as he reached the emperor’s sofa, spilling the entire tray of remote controls across the cushions.

‘That one! That one!’ Nero yelled unhelpfully, pointing to all of them.

I took aim at Nero’s chest. I was thinking how good it would feel to make this shot when someone leaped out of nowhere and stabbed me in the ribs.

Clever Apollo! I had found one of the missing demigods.

It was one of Nero’s older boys – Lucius, perhaps? I would have apologized for not remembering his name, but since he had just driven a dagger into my side and now had me locked in a death embrace, I decided we could dispense with formalities. My vision swam. My lungs refused to fill with air.

Across the room, Meg fought bare-handed against Aemillia and the third missing demigod, who had apparently also been waiting in ambush.

Lucius drove his knife in deeper. I struggled, sensing with detached medical interest that my ribs had done their job. They’d deflected the blade from my vital organs, which was great except for the excruciating pain of having a knife embedded between my skin and ribcage, and the massive amount of blood now soaking through my shirt.

I couldn’t shake Lucius. He was too strong, too close. In desperation, I yanked back my fist and gave him a big thumbs-up right in the eye.

He screamed and staggered away. Eye injuries – the absolute worst. I’m a medical god and they even make *me* squeamish.

I didn’t have the strength to nock another arrow. I stumbled, trying to stay conscious as I slipped in my own blood. It’s always a fun time when Apollo goes to war.

Through the haze of agony, I saw Nero smiling triumphantly, holding aloft a remote control. ‘Finally!’

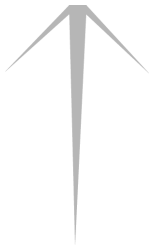
No, I prayed. *Zeus, Artemis, Leto, anybody. NO!*

I couldn’t stop the emperor. Meg was too far away, barely holding her own against her two siblings. The bull had been battered into a pile of bones. Nico had dispatched the wolf-

man but now faced a line of angry Germani between him and the throne.

‘It’s over!’ Nero gloated. ‘Death to my enemies!’

And he pushed the button.



30

Stayin’ alive is
Really hard when you’re always
Trying to kill me.

DEATH TO MY ENEMIES **WAS AN EXCELLENT** battle cry. A true classic, delivered with conviction!

Some of the drama was lost, however, when Nero pushed the button and the shades on the windows began to lower.

The emperor uttered a curse – perhaps one Meg had taught him – and dived into his sofa cushions, looking for the *correct* correct remote.

Meg had disarmed Aemillia, as she’d promised, and was now swinging her borrowed sword while more and more of her foster siblings encircled her, anxious to have a part in taking her down.

Nico waded through the Germani. They outnumbered him more than ten to one, but they quickly developed a healthy respect for his Stygian iron blade. Even barbarians can master a steep learning curve if it is sharp and painful enough. Nico couldn’t last forever against so many, though, especially since their spears had a longer reach and Nico could only see through his right eye. Vercorix barked at his men, ordering them to surround di Angelo. Unfortunately,

the grizzled lieutenant seemed much better at mustering his forces than he was at delivering remote controls.

As for me, how can I explain the difficulties of using a bow after being stabbed in the side? I was not dead yet, which confirmed that the blade had missed all my important arteries and organs, but raising my arm made me want to scream in pain. Actually aiming and drawing my bow was torture worse than anything in the Fields of Punishment, and Hades can quote me on that.

I'd lost blood. I was sweating and shivering. Nevertheless, my friends needed me. I had to do what I could.

'Mountain Dew, Mountain Dew,' I muttered, trying to clear my head.

First, I kicked Lucius in the face and knocked him out, because the sneaky little so-and-so deserved it. Then I fired an arrow at one of the other imperial demigods, who was about to stab Meg in the back. I was reluctant to kill, remembering Cassius's terrified face in the elevator, but I hit my target in the ankle, causing him to scream and do the chicken walk around the throne room. That was satisfying.

My real problem was Nero. With Meg and Nico overwhelmed, the emperor had plenty of time to fish through his sofa cushions for remotes. The fact that his blast doors were destroyed did not seem to dampen his enthusiasm for flooding the tower with poison gas. Perhaps, being a minor god, he would be immune. Perhaps he gargled with Sassanid gas every morning.

I fired at the emperor's centre mass – a shot that should have split his sternum. Instead, the arrow shattered on his toga. The garment had some form of protective magic, perhaps. Either that, or it was made by a really good tailor. With a great deal of pain, I nocked another arrow. This time I targeted Nero's head. I was reloading much too slowly. Every shot was an ordeal for my tortured body, but my aim

was true. The arrow hit him right between the eyes. And shattered uselessly.

He scowled at me from across the room. ‘Stop that!’ Then he went back to searching for his remote.

My spirits fell even further. Clearly, Nero was still invulnerable. Luguselwa had failed to destroy his fasces. That meant we faced an emperor who had three times the power of Caligula or Commodus, and they hadn’t exactly been pushovers. If Nero ever stopped obsessing about his poison-gas gadget and actually attacked us, we would be dead.

New strategy. I aimed at the remote controls. As he picked up the next one, I shot it out of his hand.

Nero snarled and grabbed another. I couldn’t fire fast enough.

He pointed the gadget at me and mashed the buttons like this might erase me from existence. Instead, three giant TV screens lowered from the ceiling and flickered to life. The first showed local news: a live feed from a helicopter circling this very tower. Apparently, we were on fire. So much for the tower being indestructible. The second screen showed a PGA tournament. The third was split between Fox News and MSNBC, which side by side should have been enough to cause an antimatter explosion. I suppose it was a sign of Nero’s apolitical bent, or perhaps his multiple personalities, that he watched them both.

Nero growled in frustration and tossed the remote away. ‘Apollo, stop fighting me! You will *die* anyway. Don’t you *understand* that? It’s me or the reptile!’

The statement rattled me, making my next shot go wide. It hit the groin of the long-suffering Vercorix, who went cross-legged in pain as the arrow corroded his body to ash.

‘Dude,’ I muttered. ‘I am *so* sorry.’

At the far end of the room, behind Nero’s dais, more barbarians appeared, marching to the emperor’s defence with their spears ready. Did Nero have a broom closet

packed with reinforcements back there? That was totally unfair.

Meg was still encircled by her foster siblings. She'd managed to get a shield, but she was hopelessly outnumbered. I understood her desire to abandon the dual scimitars Nero had given her, but I was starting to question the timing of that decision. Also, she seemed determined not to kill her attackers, but her foster siblings had no such reservations. The other demigods closed in around her, their confident smirks indicating that they sensed imminent victory.

Nico was losing steam against the Germani. His sword seemed to become ten pounds heavier every time he swung it.

I reached for my quivers and realized I had only one arrow left to shoot, not including my Shakespearean life coach from Dodona.

Nero pulled out yet another remote. Before I could take aim, he pressed a button. A mirrored ball lowered from the middle of the ceiling. Lights flashed. The Bee Gees' 'Stayin' Alive' began to play, which everyone knows is one of the Top Ten Omens of Impending Doom in the *Prophecy for Morons* handbook.

Nero threw away the remote and picked up … oh, gods. The *last* controller. The last one is *always* the right one.

'Nico!' I yelled.

I had no chance of bringing Nero down. Instead, I fired at the Germanus who stood directly between the son of Hades and the throne, blasting the barbarian to nothingness.

Bless his fancy cowboy hat, Nico understood. He charged, breaking out of the ring of Germani and leaping straight for the emperor with all his remaining strength.

Nico's downward slash should have cleaved Nero from head to devil tail, but, with his free hand, the emperor grabbed the blade and stopped it cold. The Stygian iron hissed and smoked in his grip. Golden blood trickled from

between his fingers. He yanked the blade away from Nico and tossed it across the room. Nico lunged at Nero's throat, ready to choke him or make him into a Halloween skeleton. The emperor backhanded him with such force the son of Hades flew twenty feet and slammed into the nearest pillar.

'You fools cannot kill me!' Nero roared to the beat of the Bee Gees. 'I am immortal!'

He clicked his remote. Nothing obvious happened, but the emperor screeched with delight. 'That's it! That's the one! All your friends are dead now. HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!'

Meg screamed in outrage. She tried to break out of her circle of attackers, as Nico had done, but one of the demigods tripped her. She crashed face-first onto the carpet. Her borrowed sword clattered from her grip.

I wanted to run to her aid, but I knew I was too far away. Even if I shot the Arrow of Dodona, I couldn't take down an entire group of demigods.

We had failed. In the tower below, our friends would now be choking to death – the entire camp wiped out with a single click of Nero's remote.

The Germani hauled Nico to his feet and dragged him before the throne. The imperial demigods pointed their weapons at Meg, now prone and helpless.

'Excellent!' Nero beamed. 'But first things first. Guards, kill Apollo!'

The Germani reinforcements barrelled towards me.

I fumbled for my ukulele, desperately reviewing my repertoire for a song that would produce a stunning reversal of fortunes. 'I Believe in Miracles'? 'Make It Right'?

Behind me, a familiar voice roared, 'STOP!'

The tone was so commanding even Nero's guards and family members turned towards the broken blast doors.

On the threshold stood Will Solace, radiating brilliant light. At his left was Luguselwa, alive and well, her stumps

now outfitted with daggers instead of silverware. At Will's right was Rachel Elizabeth Dare, holding a large axe wrapped in a golden bundle of rods: the fasces of Nero.

'*No one* hits my boyfriend,' Will thundered. 'And no one kills my dad!'

Nero's guards made ready to attack, but the emperor cried, 'EVERYONE FREEZE!'

His voice was so shrill that several of the Germani looked back to be sure he was the one who'd spoken.

The demigods of the imperial family did not look pleased. They'd been about to give Meg the Julius-Caesar-in-the-Senate treatment, but at Nero's command they stayed their weapons.

Rachel Dare scanned the room: the pollen-covered furniture and barbarians, the overgrown dryad trees, the pile of bull bones, the cracked windows and columns, the shades still going up and down on their own, the TVs blaring, the Bee Gees playing, the disco ball swirling.

'What have you guys been *doing* in here?' she muttered.

Will Solace strode confidently across the room, barking 'Out of my way!' to the Germani. He marched straight to Nico and helped the son of Hades to his feet. Then he dragged Nico back to the entrance. No one tried to stop them.

The emperor inched backwards on his dais. He put one hand behind him, as if to reassure himself that his sofa was still there in case he needed to faint dramatically. He ignored Will and Nico. His eyes were fixed on Rachel and the fasces.

'You.' Nero wagged his finger at my red-headed friend. 'You're the Pythia.'

Rachel hefted the fasces in her arms like a baby – a very heavy, pointy golden baby. 'Rachel Elizabeth Dare,' she said. 'And right now I'm the girl holding your life in her hands.'

Nero licked his lips. He frowned, then grimaced, as if exercising his facial muscles for an onstage soliloquy. ‘You, ah, you all should be dead.’

He sounded both polite and vexed, as if chiding our comrades for not calling first before dropping by for dinner.

From behind Luguselwa, a smaller figure emerged: Screech-Bling, CEO of Troglodyte Inc., festooned with six new hats atop his tricorn. His grin was almost as bright as Will Solace.

‘Gas traps are – *CLICK* – finicky!’ he said. ‘Have to be sure the detonators are working.’ He opened his hand and let four nine-volt batteries tumble to the floor.

Nero glared at his foster children as if to say, *You had* one *job.*

‘And how exactly …?’ Nero blinked and squinted. The glow of his own fasces seemed to hurt his eyes. ‘The leontocephaline … You couldn’t have defeated him.’

‘I didn’t.’ Lu stepped forward, allowing me a closer look at her new attachments. Someone – I guessed Will – had fixed her up with fresh bandages, more surgical tape and better blades, giving her a low-budget Wolverine look. ‘I traded what the guardian required: my immortality.’

‘But you don’t *have* …’ Nero’s throat seemed to close up. A look of dread came over his face, which was like watching someone press on wet sand and expel water from the centre.

I had to laugh. It was totally inappropriate, but it felt good.

‘Lu has immortality,’ I said, ‘because *you’re* immortal. The two of you have been connected for centuries.’

Nero’s eye twitched. ‘But that’s *my* eternal life! You can’t trade my life for my life!’

Lu shrugged. ‘It’s a little shady, I agree. But the leontocephaline seemed to find it … amusing.’

Nero stared at her in disbelief. ‘You would kill yourself just to kill me?’

‘In a heartbeat,’ Lu said. ‘But it won’t come to that. I’m just a regular mortal now. Destroying the fasces will do the same to you.’ She gestured to her Germanic former comrades. ‘And all your other guards, too. They’ll be free of your bondage. Then … we’ll see how long you last.’

Nero laughed as abruptly as I had. ‘You can’t! Don’t *any* of you understand? All the power of the Triumvirate is mine now. My fasces …’ His eyes lit with sudden hope. ‘You haven’t destroyed it yet, because you *can’t* . Even if you could, you’d release so much power it would burn you to cinders. And, even if you didn’t mind dying, the power … *all* the power I’ve been accumulating for centuries would just sink into Delphi … to – to *him* . You don’t want that, believe me!’

The terror in his voice was absolutely genuine. I finally realized just how much fear he’d been living with. Python had always been the real power behind the throne – a bigger puppet master than Nero’s mother had ever been. Like most bullies, Nero had been shaped and manipulated by an even stronger abuser.

‘You – Pythia,’ he said. ‘Raquel –’

‘Rachel.’

‘That’s what I said! I can *influence* the reptile. I can convince him to give you your powers back. But kill me, and all is lost. He – he doesn’t think like a human. He has no mercy, no compassion. He’ll destroy the future of our kind!’

Rachel shrugged. ‘Seems to me that you’ve chosen your kind, Nero. And it isn’t humanity.’

Nero cast his eyes desperately around the room. He fixed his gaze on Meg, who was now on her feet, swaying wearily in the circle of her imperial siblings. ‘Meg, dear. Tell them! I said I would let you choose. I trust your sweet nature, your good senses!’

Meg regarded him as if he were a distasteful wall painting.

She addressed her foster siblings: ‘What you guys have done up till now … it isn’t your fault. It’s Nero’s fault. But now you’ve got to make a choice. Stand up to him, like I did. Drop your weapons.’

Nero hissed. ‘Ungrateful child. The Beast –’

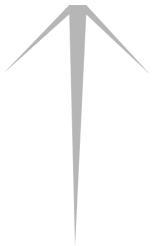
‘The Beast is dead.’ Meg tapped the side of her head. ‘I killed it. Surrender, Nero. My friends will let you live in a nice prison somewhere. It’s more than you deserve.’

‘That,’ Lu said, ‘is the best deal you’re going to get, Emperor. Tell your followers to stand down.’

Nero looked on the verge of tears. He seemed like he was ready to set aside centuries of tyranny and power struggles and to betray his reptile overlord. Villainy, after all, was a thankless, exhausting job.

He took a deep breath.

Then he screamed, ‘KILL THEM ALL!’ And a dozen Germani charged me.



31

Godly tug-of-war
Not recommended for kids.
Or Lesters, either.

WE ALL MAKE OUR CHOICES.

Mine was to turn and run.

Not that I was terrified of a dozen Germani trying to kill me. Okay, yes, I was terrified of a dozen Germani trying to kill me. But also I had no arrows and no strength left. I badly wanted to hide behind – I mean, stand next to – Rachel, Screech-Bling and my old friend the low-budget Celtic Wolverine.

And … *and* . Nero's words rang in my ears. Destroying the fasces would be deadly. I could not allow anyone else to take that risk. Perhaps the leontocephaline had been amused for reasons Lu hadn't understood. Perhaps my sacrifice couldn't be avoided as easily as she believed.

I stumbled into Luguselwa, who managed to catch me without stabbing me to death. Will, still glowing like an overachieving night light, had propped Nico against the wall and was now tending to his wounds. Screech-Bling let out a high-pitched whistle, and more troglodytes poured

into the room, charging the emperor's forces in a flurry of shrieks, mining picks and stylish headwear.

I gasped for breath, making a grabby-hand gesture at Rachel. 'Give me the fasces.'

'Please?' she prompted. 'And, *Gee, sorry, I underestimated you, Rachel, you're actually kind of a warrior queen* ?'

'Yes, please, and thank you, and all of that!'

Lu scowled. 'Apollo, are you sure you can destroy it? I mean, without killing yourself?'

'No and no,' I said.

Rachel stared into the air, as if reading a prophecy written in the dancing lights of the disco ball. 'I can't see the outcome,' she said. 'But he has to try.'

I took the fasces, struggling not to collapse under its weight. The ceremonial weapon hummed and shuddered like an overheating race-car engine. Its aura made my pores pop and my ears ring. My side started to bleed again, if it had ever really stopped. I wasn't thrilled about the blood trickling down my chest and into my underwear while I had an important job to do. Sorry again, underwear.

'Cover me,' I told the ladies.

Lu leaped into battle, stabbing, slashing and kicking any Germani who got past the troglodytes. Rachel pulled out a blue plastic hairbrush and threw it at the nearest barbarian, beaning him in the eye and making him howl.

Sorry I underestimated you, Rachel, I thought distantly. *You're actually kind of a hairbrush ninja.*

I cast a worried glance across the room. Meg was all right. *More* than all right. She had convinced all her remaining foster siblings to throw down their weapons. Now she stood in front of them like a general trying to shore up her demoralized troops. Or – a less flattering comparison – she reminded me of one of Hades's dog trainers working with a pack of new hellhounds. At the moment, the demigods were obeying her commands and

staying put, but any sign of weakness from her, any change in the temperature of the battle, and they might break ranks and slaughter everyone in sight.

It didn't help that Nero was stomping up and down on his couch, screeching, 'Kill Apollo! Kill Apollo!' as if I were a cockroach he'd just spotted scurrying across the floor.

For Meg's sake, I had to hurry.

I gripped the fasces with both hands and tried to prise it apart. The golden bundle of rods glowed brighter and warmer, illuminating the bones and red flesh of my fingers, but it didn't budge.

'Come on,' I muttered, trying again, hoping for a burst of godly strength. 'If you need another immortal life as a sacrifice, I'm right here!'

Maybe I should have felt foolish negotiating with a Roman ceremonial axe, but after my conversations with the Arrow of Dodona it seemed like a reasonable thing to try.

The troglodytes made the Germani look like the bumbling team the Harlem Globetrotters always played. (Sorry, Washington Generals.) Lu sliced and poked and parried with her knife hands. Rachel stood protectively in front of me and occasionally muttered, 'Apollo, now would be good,' which I did not find helpful.

Meg still had her foster siblings under control for the time being, but that could change. She was talking to them encouragingly, gesturing to me with a look that said *Apollo has this. He'll destroy Dad any minute. Just watch.*

I wished I shared her certainty.

I took a shaky breath. 'I can do this. I just need to concentrate. How hard can it be to destroy myself?'

I tried to break the fasces over my knee, which nearly broke my knee.

At last Nero lost his cool. I supposed there was only so much satisfaction he could get from stomping on his sofa and screaming at his minions.

‘Do I have to do everything myself?’ he yelled. ‘Do I have to kill you *all* ? You forget I AM A GOD!’

He jumped off his couch and marched straight towards me, his whole body starting to glow, because Will Solace couldn’t have his own thing. Oh, no, Nero had to glow, too.

Trogs swarmed the emperor. He tossed them aside. Germani who didn’t get out of his way fast enough were also thrown into the next time zone. Meg looked like she wanted to challenge Nero herself, but any move away from her foster siblings would have shattered their delicate standoff. Nico was still only half-conscious. Will was busy trying to revive him.

That left Lu and Rachel as my last line of defence. I couldn’t have that. They’d been in harm’s way for my sake enough already.

Nero might’ve been the most minor of minor gods, but he still had divine strength. His glow was getting brighter as he approached the fasces – like Will, like me in my own godly moments of rage …

A thought came to me – or maybe something deeper than a thought, a sort of instinctive recognition. Like Caligula, Nero had always wanted to be the new sun god. He’d designed his giant golden Colossus to look like my body with his head on it. This fasces wasn’t just his symbol of power and immortality – it was his claim to godhood.

What had he asked me earlier …? *Are you worthy of being a god?*

That was the central question. He believed he made a better deity than I did. Perhaps he was right, or perhaps neither of us was worthy. There was one way to find out. If I couldn’t destroy the fasces myself, maybe with a little godly help …

‘Get out of the way!’ I told Lu and Rachel.

They glanced back at me like I was crazy.

‘RUN!’ I told them.

They broke to either side just before Nero would have ploughed through them.

The emperor stopped in front of me, his eyes flickering with power.

'You lose,' he said. 'Give it to me.'

'Take it if you can.' I began to glow myself. Radiance intensified around me, as it had months ago in Indianapolis, but slower this time, building to a crescendo. The fasces pulsed in sympathy, beginning to superheat. Nero snarled and grabbed the handle of the axe.

To our mutual surprise, the strength of my grip was equal to his. We played tug-of-war, swinging the blade back and forth, trying to kill each other, but neither of us could win. The glow around us increased like a feedback loop – bleaching the carpet under our feet, whitening the black marble columns. Germani had to stop fighting just to shield their eyes. Trogs screamed and retreated, their dark goggles insufficient protection.

'You – cannot – take – it, Lester!' Nero said through clenched teeth, pulling with all his might.

'I am Apollo,' I said, tugging the other direction. 'God of the sun. And I – revoke – your – divinity!'

The fasces cracked in two – the shaft shattering, the rods and golden blade exploding like a firebomb. A tsunami of flames washed over me, along with thousands of years of Nero's pent-up rage, fear and insatiable hunger – the twisted sources of his power. I stood my ground, but Nero hurtled backwards and landed on the carpet, his clothes smouldering, his skin mottled with burns.

My glow started to fade. I was unharmed … or at least no more harmed than I'd been before.

The fasces was broken, but Nero remained alive and intact. Had all this been for nothing, then?

At least he wasn't gloating any more. Instead, the emperor sobbed in despair. 'What have you done? Don't you see?'

Only then did he begin to crumble. His fingers disintegrated. His toga frayed into smoke. A glittery cloud plumed from his mouth and nose, as if he were exhaling his life force along with his final breaths. Worst of all – this glitter didn't simply vanish. It poured downward, seeping into the Persian rug, worming into cracks between the floor tiles, almost as if Nero were being pulled – *clawed and dragged* – into the depths, piece by piece.

'You've given him victory,' he whimpered. 'You've –'

The last of his mortal form dissolved and soaked through the floor.

Everyone in the room stared at me. The Germani dropped their weapons.

Nero was finally gone.

I wanted to feel joy and relief, but all I felt was exhaustion.

'Is it over?' Lu asked.

Rachel stood next to me, but her voice seemed to come from very far away: 'Not yet. Not even close.'

My consciousness was dimming, but I knew she was right. I understood the real threat now. I had to get going. There was no time to waste.

Instead, I toppled into Rachel's arms and passed out.

I found myself hovering over a different throne room – the Council of the Gods on Mount Olympus. Thrones curved around Hestia's great hearth, forming a U. My family, such as they were, sat watching a holographic image that floated above the flames. It was me, lying passed out in Rachel's arms in Nero's tower.

So … I was watching them watch me watch them … Nope. Too meta.

'This is the most critical time,' Athena said. She was dressed in her usual armour and oversize helmet, which I'm pretty sure she stole from Marvin the Martian in Looney Tunes. 'He is perilously close to failure.'

‘Hmph.’ Ares sat back and crossed his arms. ‘I wish he’d get on with it, then. I have twenty golden drachma riding on this.’

‘That is *so* callous,’ Hermes chided. ‘Besides, it’s *thirty* drachmas, and I gave you very good odds.’ He pulled out a leather-bound notepad and a pencil. ‘Any final bets, people?’

‘Stop,’ Zeus rumbled. He was dressed in a sombre black three-piece suit, as if on his way to my funeral. His shaggy black beard was freshly combed and oiled. His eyes flickered with subdued lightning. He almost looked concerned for my situation.

Then again, he was as good an actor as Nero.

‘We must wait for the final battle,’ he announced. ‘The worst is yet to come.’

‘Hasn’t he proved himself already?’ Artemis demanded. My heart ached, seeing my sister again. ‘He’s suffered more in these last few months than even *you* could have expected! Whatever lesson you were trying to teach him, dear Father, he’s learned it!’

Zeus glowered. ‘You do not understand all the forces at work here, Daughter. Apollo *must* face the final challenge, for all our sakes.’

Hephaestus sat forward in his mechanical recliner, adjusting his leg braces. ‘And, if he fails, what then? Eleven Olympian gods? That’s a terribly unbalanced number.’

‘It could work,’ Aphrodite said.

‘Don’t you start!’ Artemis snapped.

Aphrodite batted her eyelashes, feigning innocence. ‘What? I’m just saying some pantheons have *way* less than twelve. Or we could elect a new twelfth.’

‘A god of climate disasters!’ Ares suggested. ‘That would be awesome. He and I could work well together!’

‘Stop it, all of you.’ Queen Hera had been sitting back with a dark veil over her face. Now she lifted it. To my surprise, her eyes were red and swollen. She had been

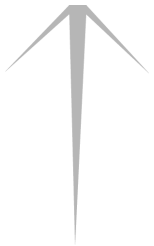
crying. ‘This has gone on long enough. Too much loss. Too much pain. But, if my *husband* insists on seeing it through, the least you all can do is not talk about Apollo as if he’s already dead!’

Wow , I thought. *Who is this woman and what has she done with my stepmother?*

‘Nonexistent,’ Athena amended. ‘If he fails, his fate will be much worse than death. But, whatever happens, it begins now.’

They all leaned forward, staring at the vision in the flames as my body began to stir.

Then I was back in my mortal form, looking up not at the Olympians, but at the faces of my friends.



32

The final push, fam.
Not throwing away my shot.
Wait. Where is my shot?

‘I WAS DREAMING …’ I POINTED WEAKLY at Meg. ‘And you weren’t there. Neither were you, Lu. Or Nico and Will …’

Will and Nico exchanged worried looks, no doubt wondering if I had suffered brain damage.

‘We need to get you to camp,’ Will said. ‘I’ll get one of the pegasi –’

‘No.’ I struggled to sit up. ‘I – I have to leave.’

Lu snorted. ‘Look at yourself, buddy. You’re in worse shape than I am.’

She was right, of course. At the moment, I doubted my hands were working as well as Lu’s dagger attachments. My whole body shook with exhaustion. My muscles felt like worn-out tension cords. I had more cuts and bruises than the average rugby team. Nevertheless …

‘I have no choice,’ I said. ‘Nectar, please? And supplies. More arrows. My bow.’

‘He’s right, unfortunately,’ Rachel said. ‘Python …’ She clenched her jaw as if forcing down a belch of serpent

prophecy gas. ‘Python is getting stronger by the second.’

Everyone looked grim, but no one argued. After all we’d been through, why would they? My confrontation with Python was just another impossible task in a day of impossible tasks.

‘I’ll gather some supplies.’ Rachel kissed my forehead, then dashed off.

‘Bow and quiver coming up,’ Nico said.

‘And ukulele,’ Will added.

Nico winced. ‘Do we really hate Python that much?’

Will raised an eyebrow.

‘Fine.’ Nico dashed off without kissing me on the forehead, which was just as well. He couldn’t have reached my forehead with the massive brim of his cowboy hat.

Lu glowered at me. ‘You did good, cellmate.’

Was I crying? Had there been any point in the last twenty-four hours when I hadn’t been crying? ‘Lu … You’re good people. I’m sorry I mistrusted you.’

‘Eh.’ She waved one of her daggers. ‘That’s okay. I thought you were pretty useless, too.’

‘I – I didn’t say useless …’

‘I should go check on the former imperial family,’ she said. ‘They’re looking a little lost without General Sapling.’ She winked at Meg, then lumbered off.

Will pressed a vial of nectar into my hands. ‘Drink this. And this.’ He passed me a Mountain Dew. ‘And here’s some salve for those wounds.’ He handed the jar to Meg. ‘Could you do the honours? I have to find more bandages. I used up my supply outfitting Luguselwa Dagger-Hands.’

He hurried away, leaving me alone with Meg.

She sat next to me, cross-legged, and started finger-painting my ouchies with healing ointment. She had plenty of ouchies to choose from. I alternated drinking my nectar and Mountain Dew, which was sort of like alternating between premium gasoline and regular gasoline.

Meg had thrown away her sandals, braving bare feet despite the arrows, rubble, bones and discarded blades that littered the floor. Someone had given her an orange Camp Half-Blood shirt, which she'd put on over her dress, making her allegiance clear. She still looked older and more sophisticated, but she also looked like my Meg.

'I'm so proud of you,' I said. I definitely was not weeping like a baby. 'You were so strong. So brilliant. So – OW!'

She poked the dagger wound in my side, effectively silencing my compliments. 'Yeah, I know. I had to be. For them.'

She chin-pointed to her wayward foster siblings, who had broken down in the wake of Nero's death. A couple of them stormed around the room, throwing things and screaming hateful comments while Luguselwa and some of our demigods stood by, giving them space, watching to make sure the imperials didn't hurt themselves or anyone else. Another child of Nero was curled up and sobbing between two Aphrodite campers who'd been pressed into service as grief counsellors. Nearby, one of the youngest imperials appeared catatonic in the arms of a Hypnos camper, who rocked the child back and forth while singing lullabies.

In the space of an evening, the imperial children had gone from enemies to victims who needed help, and Camp Half-Blood was stepping up to the challenge.

'They'll need time,' Meg said. 'And a lot of good support, like I got.'

'They'll need *you* ,' I added. 'You showed them the way out.'

She gave me a one-shoulder shrug. 'You really got a lot of wounds.'

I let her work, but as I sipped my high-octane beverages, I considered that perhaps courage was a self-perpetuating cycle, like abuse. Nero had hoped to create miniature, tortured versions of himself because that made him feel stronger. Meg had found the strength to oppose him

because she saw how much her foster siblings needed her to succeed, to show them another way.

There were no guarantees. The imperial demigods had dealt with so much for so long, some of them might never be able to come back from the darkness. Then again, there had been no guarantees for Meg, either. There were still no guarantees that *I* would come back from what awaited me in the caverns of Delphi. All any of us could do was try, and hope that, in the end, the virtuous cycle would break the vicious one.

I scanned the rest of the throne room, wondering how long I had been unconscious. Outside it was full dark. Emergency lights pulsed against the side of the neighbouring building from the street far below. The *thwump-thwump-thwump* of a helicopter told me we were still making local news.

Most of the troglodytes had vanished, though Screech-Bling and a few of his lieutenants were here, having what looked like a serious conversation with Sherman Yang. Perhaps they were negotiating a division of the spoils of war. I imagined Camp Half-Blood was about to be flush with Greek fire and Imperial gold weapons, while the trogs would have a fabulous new selection of haberdashery and whatever lizards and rocks they could find.

Demigod children of Demeter were tending the overgrown dryads, discussing how best to transport them back to camp. Over by the emperor's dais, some of the Apollo kids (*my* kids) conducted triage operations. Jerry, Yan and Gracie – the newbies from camp – now all looked like seasoned pros, shouting orders to the stretcher-bearers, examining the wounded, treating campers and Germani alike.

The barbarians looked glum and dejected. None seemed to have the slightest interest in fighting. A few sported injuries that should have made them crumble to ash, but they were no longer creatures of Nero, bound to the living

world by his power. They were just humans again, like Luguselwa. They would have to find a new purpose for their remaining years, and I supposed none of them loved the idea of staying loyal to the cause of a dead emperor.

'You were right,' I told Meg. 'About trusting Luguselwa. I was wrong.'

Meg patted my knuckles. 'Just keep saying that. I'm right. You're wrong. Been waiting months for you to realize it.'

She gave me a little smirk. Again, I could only marvel at how much she'd changed. She still looked ready to do a cartwheel for no reason, or wipe her nose on her sleeve with zero shame, or eat an entire birthday cake just because yum, but she was no longer the half-wild alley-dwelling urchin I'd met in January. She'd grown taller and more confident. She carried herself like someone who owned this tower. And for all I knew she might, now that Nero was dead, assuming the whole place didn't burn down.

'I …' My voice failed me. 'Meg, I have to –'

'I know.' She looked away long enough to wipe her cheek, knocking her glasses cockeyed in the process. 'You have to do this next part on your own, huh?'

I thought about the last time I'd physically stood in the depths of Delphi, when Meg and I had inadvertently wandered there through the Labyrinth during a three-legged race. (Ah, those were simpler times.) The situation now was different. Python had grown too powerful. Having seen his lair in my dreams, I knew that no demigod could survive that place. The poisonous air alone would burn away flesh and melt lungs. I did not expect to survive there long myself, but in my heart I had always known this would be a one-way trip.

'I must do this alone,' I agreed.

'How?'

Leave it to Meg to distil the most important crisis of my four-thousand-year-plus life into a single unanswerable question.

I shook my head, wishing I had an unquestionable answer. ‘I guess I have to trust that … that I won’t screw up.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Oh, shut it, McCaffrey.’

She forced a smile. After a few more moments of putting salve on my wounds, she said, ‘So … this is goodbye?’ She swallowed that last word.

I tried to find my voice. I seemed to have lost it somewhere down in my intestines. ‘I – I will find you, Meg. Afterwards. Assuming …’

‘No screw-ups.’

I made a sound between a laugh and a sob. ‘Yes. But either way …’

She nodded. Even if I survived, I would not be the same. The best I could hope for was to emerge from Delphi with my godhood restored, which was what I had wanted and dreamed about for the past half a year. So why did I feel so reluctant about leaving behind the broken, battered form of Lester Papadopoulos?

‘Just come back to me, dummy. That’s an order.’ Meg gave me a gentle hug, conscious of my injuries. Then she got to her feet and ran off to check on the imperial demigods – her former family, and possibly her family yet to be.

My other friends all seemed to understand, too.

Will did some last-minute bandaging. Nico handed me my weapons. Rachel gave me a new pack stuffed with supplies. But none of them offered any lingering goodbyes. They knew every minute counted now. They wished me luck and let me go.

As I passed, Screech-Bling and the troglodyte lieutenants stood at attention and removed their headwear – all six hundred and twenty hats. I recognized the honour. I nodded my thanks and forged on across the broken threshold before I could melt into another fit of ugly sobbing.

I passed Austin and Kayla in the antechamber, tending to more wounded and directing younger demigods in cleanup efforts. They both gave me weary smiles, acknowledging the million things we didn't have time to say. I pushed onward.

I ran into Chiron by the elevators, on his way to deliver more medical supplies.

'You came to our rescue,' I said. 'Thank you.'

He looked down at me benevolently, his head nearly scraping the ceiling, which had not been designed to accommodate centaurs. 'We all have a duty to rescue each other, wouldn't you say?'

I nodded, wondering how the centaur had become so wise over the centuries, and why that same wisdom had escaped me until I had been Lesterized. 'And did your … joint task force meeting go well?' I asked, trying to remember what Dionysus had told us about why Chiron had been away. It seemed like so long ago. 'Something about a severed cat's head?'

Chiron chuckled. 'A severed head. And a cat. Two different … uh, people. Acquaintances of mine from other pantheons. We were discussing a mutual problem.'

He just threw that information out there as if it wasn't a brain-exploding grenade. Chiron had acquaintances from other pantheons? Of course he did. And a mutual problem …?

'Do I want to know?' I asked.

'No,' he said gravely. 'You really don't.' He offered his hand. 'Good luck, Apollo.'

We shook, and off I went.

I found the stairs and took them. I didn't trust the elevators. During my dream in the cell, I'd seen myself sweeping down the stairwells of the tower when I fell to Delphi. I was determined to take the same path in real life. Maybe it wouldn't matter, but I would've felt silly if I took a wrong turn on my way to confront Python and ended up getting arrested by the NYPD in the Triumvirate Holdings lobby.

My bow and quiver jostled against my back, clanging against my ukulele strings. My new supply pack felt cold and heavy. I held on to the railing so my wobbly legs wouldn't collapse under me. My ribs felt like they'd been newly tattooed with lava, but considering everything I'd been through, I felt remarkably whole. Maybe my mortal body was giving me one last push. Maybe my godly constitution was kicking in to help. Maybe it was the nectar-and-Mountain-Dew cocktail coursing through my bloodstream. Whatever it was, I would take all the help I could get.

Ten floors. Twenty floors. I lost track. Stairwells are horrible, disorienting places. I was alone with the sound of my breathing and the pounding of my feet against the steps.

A few more floors, and I began to smell smoke. The hazy air stung my eyes.

Apparently, part of the building was still on fire. Awesome.

The smoke got thicker as I continued to descend. I began to cough and gag. I pressed my forearm over my nose and mouth and found that this did not make a very good filter.

My consciousness swam. I considered opening a side door and trying to find fresh air, but I couldn't see any exits. Weren't stairwells supposed to have those? My lungs screamed. My oxygen-deprived brain felt like it was about to pop out of my skull, sprout wings and fly away.

I realized I might be starting to hallucinate. Brains with wings. Cool!

I trudged forward. Wait … What happened to the stairs? When had I reached a level surface? I could see nothing through the smoke. The ceiling got lower and lower. I stretched out my hands, searching for any kind of support. On either side of me, my fingers brushed against warm, solid rock.

The passageway continued to shrink. Ultimately I was forced to crawl, sandwiched between two horizontal sheets of stone with barely enough room to raise my head. My ukulele wedged itself in my armpit. My quiver scraped against the ceiling.

I began to squirm and hyperventilate from claustrophobia, but I forced myself to calm down. I was not stuck. I could breathe, strangely enough. The smoke had changed to volcanic gas, which tasted terrible and smelled worse, but my burning lungs somehow continued to process it. My respiratory system might melt later, but right now, I was still sucking in the sulphur.

I knew this smell. I was somewhere in the tunnels beneath Delphi. Thanks to the magic of the Labyrinth and/or some strange sorcerous high-speed link that connected Nero’s tower to the reptile’s lair, I had climbed, walked, stumbled and crawled halfway across the world in a few minutes. My aching legs felt every mile.

I wriggled onward towards a dim light in the distance.

Rumbling noises echoed through a much larger space ahead. Something huge and heavy was breathing.

The crawl space ended abruptly. I found myself peering down from the lip of a small crevice, like an air vent. Below me spread an enormous cavern – the lair of Python.

When I had fought Python before, thousands of years ago, I hadn’t needed to seek out this place. I had lured him into the upper world and fought him in the fresh air and sunlight, which had been much better.

Now, looking down from my crawl space, I wished I could be anywhere else. The floor stretched for several football fields, punctuated by stalagmites and split by a web of glowing volcanic fissures that spewed plumes of gas. The uneven rock surface was covered with a shag carpet of horror: centuries of discarded snakeskins, bones and the desiccated carcasses of … I didn't want to know. Python had all those volcanic crevices right there, and he couldn't be bothered to incinerate his trash?

The monster himself, roughly the size of a dozen jackknifed cargo trucks, took up the back quarter of the cavern. His body was a mountain of reptilian coils, rippling with muscle, but he was more than simply a big snake. Python shifted and changed as it suited him – sprouting clawed feet, or vestigial bat wings, or extra hissing heads along the side of his body, all of which withered and dropped off as rapidly as they formed. He was the reptilian conglomeration of everything that mammals feared in their deepest, most primal nightmares.

I'd suppressed the memory of just how hideous he was. I preferred him when he'd been obscured in poisonous fumes. His cab-size head rested on one of his coils. His eyes were closed, but that did not fool me. The monster never really slept. He only waited … for his hunger to swell, for his chance at world domination, for small, foolish Lesters to jump into his cave.

At the moment, a shimmering haze seemed to be settling over him, like the embers of a spectacular fireworks show. With nauseating certainty, I realized I was watching Python absorb the last remnants of the fallen Triumvirate's power. The reptile looked blissful, soaking in all that warm, Nero-y goodness.

I had to hurry. I had one shot at defeating my old enemy.

I was not ready. I was not rested. I was definitely not bringing my A-game. In fact, I had been so far below my A-

game for so long that I could barely remember any letters north of *LMNOP* .

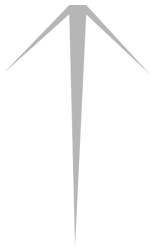
Yet somehow I'd got this far. I felt a tingly sensation of power building just under my skin – perhaps my divine self, trying to reassert itself in the proximity of my old archenemy. I hoped it was that and not just my mortal body combusting.

I managed to manoeuvre my bow into my hands, draw an arrow and nock it – no easy task while lying flat on your belly in a crawl space. I even managed to avoid whanging my ukulele against the rocks and giving away my position with a rousing open chord.

So far, so good.

Deep breath. This was for Meg. This was for Jason. This was for everyone who had fought and sacrificed to drag my sorry mortal butt from quest to quest for the last six months, just to get me this chance at redemption.

I kicked forward, spilling head first out of the crack in the ceiling. I flipped in mid-air, aimed … and fired my arrow at Python's head.



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Seriously, guys,
I know my shot was right here.
Help me look for it.

I MISSED.

Don’t even pretend you’re surprised.

Rather than piercing the monster’s skull as I’d hoped, my arrow shattered on the rocks a few feet from his head. Splinters skittered harmlessly across the cavern floor. Python’s lamp-like eyes snapped open.

I landed in the centre of the room, ankle-deep in a bed of old snakeskin. At least I didn’t break my legs on impact. I could save that disaster for my big finale.

Python studied me, his gaze cutting like headlights through the volcanic fumes. The shimmering haze that surrounded him was snuffed out. Whether he had finished digesting its power, or whether I had interrupted him, I couldn’t be sure.

I hoped he might roar in frustration. Instead, he laughed – a deep rumble that liquefied my courage. It’s unnerving to watch a reptile laugh. Their faces are simply not designed for showing humour. Python didn’t smile, per se, but he bared his fangs, pulled back his Tootsie-roll-

segmented lips and let his forked tongue lash the air, probably savouring the scent of my fear.

'And here we are.' His voice came from all around me, each word a drill bit set against my joints. 'I have not quite finished digesting Nero's power, but I suppose it will have to do. He tastes like dried rat anyway.'

I was relieved to hear I'd interrupted Python's emperor-tasting. Perhaps this would make him slightly less impossible to defeat. On the other hand, I didn't like how unperturbed he sounded, how utterly confident.

Of course, I didn't look like much of a threat.

I nocked another arrow. 'Slither away, snake. While you still can.'

Python's eyes gleamed with amusement. 'Amazing. You *still* haven't learned humility? I wonder how you will taste. Like rat? Like god? They are similar enough, I suppose.'

He was *so* wrong. Not about gods tasting like rats … I wouldn't know. But I had learned *plenty* of humility. So much humility that now, facing my old nemesis, I was racked with self-doubt. I could not do this. What had I been thinking?

And yet, along with humility, I'd learned something else: getting humiliated is only the beginning, not the end. Sometimes you need a second shot, and a third, and a fourth.

I fired my arrow. This one hit Python in the face, skittering across his left eyelid and making him blink.

He hissed, raising his head until it towered twenty feet above me. 'Stop embarrassing yourself, Lester. I control Delphi. I would have been content to rule the world through my puppets, the emperors, but you have helpfully cut out the middlemen. I have digested the power of the Triumvirate! Now I will digest –'

My third shot throat-punched him. It didn't pierce the skin. That would've been too much to hope for. But it hit with sufficient force to make him gag.

I sidestepped around piles of scales and bones. I jumped a narrow fissure so hot it steam-baked my crotch. I nocked another arrow as Python's form began to change. Rows of tiny leathery wings sprouted from his back. Two massive legs grew from his belly, lifting him up until he resembled a giant Komodo dragon.

'I see,' he grumbled. 'Won't go quietly. That's fine. We can make this hurt.'

He tilted his head, like a dog listening – an image that made me never want to own a dog. 'Ah … Delphi speaks. Would you like to know your future, Lester? It's very short.'

Green luminescent fumes thickened and swirled around him, filling the air with the acrid scent of rot. I watched, too horrified to move, as Python breathed in the spirit of Delphi, twisting and poisoning its ancient power until he spoke in a booming voice, his words carrying the inescapable weight of destiny: '*Apollo will fall – '*

'NO!' Rage filled my body. My arms steamed. My hands glowed. I fired my fourth arrow and pierced Python's hide just above his new right leg.

The monster stumbled, his concentration broken. Clouds of gas dissipated around him.

He hissed in pain, stomping his legs to make sure they still worked.

He roared, 'NEVER INTERRUPT A PROPHECY!'

Then he barrelled towards me like a hungry freight train.

I leaped to one side, somersaulting through a pile of carcasses as Python bit a chunk out of the cave floor where I'd been standing. Baseball-size debris rained down around me. One chunk hit the back of my head and nearly knocked me unconscious.

Python struck again. I'd been trying to string another shaft, but he was too fast. I jumped out of the way, landing on my bow and shattering my arrow in the process.

The cave was now a whirring factory of snake flesh – conveyor belts, shredder apparatuses, compactors and

pistons, all made of Python's writhing body, every component ready to grind me into pulp. I scrambled to my feet and leaped over a section of the monster's body, narrowly avoiding a newly grown head that snapped at me from Python's side.

Given Python's strength and my own frailty, I should have died several times over. The only thing keeping me alive was my small size. Python was a bazooka; I was a housefly. He could easily kill me with one shot, but he had to catch me first.

'You heard your fate!' Python boomed. I could feel the cold presence of his massive head looming above me. '*Apollo will fall.* It's not much, but it's enough!'

He almost caught me in a coil of flesh, but I hopped out of the snare. My tap-dancing friend Lavinia Asimov would have been proud of my fancy footwork.

'You cannot escape your destiny!' Python gloated. 'I have spoken, so must it be!'

This demanded a witty comeback, but I was too busy gasping and wheezing.

I leaped onto Python's trunk and used it as a bridge to cross one of the fissures. I thought I was being clever until a random lizard foot sprouted next to me and raked my ankle with its claws. I screamed and stumbled, desperately grasping for any handhold as I slipped off the side of the reptile. I managed to grab a leathery wing, which flapped in protest, trying to shake me off. I got one foot on the rim of the fissure, then somehow hauled myself back to solid ground.

Bad news: my bow tumbled into the void.

I couldn't stop to mourn. My leg was on fire. My shoe was wet with my own blood. Naturally, those claws would be venomous. I'd probably just reduced my lifespan from a few minutes to a few fewer minutes. I limped towards the cavern wall and squeezed myself into a vertical crack no

bigger than a coffin. (Oh, *why* did I have to make that comparison?)

I'd lost my best weapon. I had arrows but nothing to shoot them with. Whatever fits of godly power I was experiencing, they weren't consistent and they weren't enough. That left me with an out-of-tune ukulele and a rapidly deteriorating human body.

I wished my friends were here. I would have given anything for Meg's exploding tomato plants, or Nico's Stygian iron blade, or even a team of fast-running troglodytes to carry me around the cavern and screech insults at the giant tasty reptile.

But I was alone.

Wait. A faint tingle of hope ran through me. Not *quite* alone. I fumbled in my quiver and drew out Ye Olde Arrow of Dodona.

HOW DOETH WE, SIRRAH? The arrow's voice buzzed in my head.

'Doething great,' I wheezed. 'I gotteth him right where I wanteth him.'

THAT BAD? ZOUNDS!

'Where are you, Apollo?' Python roared. 'I can smell your blood!'

'Hear that, arrow?' I wheezed, delirious from exhaustion and the venom coursing through my veins. 'I forced him to call me Apollo!'

A GREAT VICTORY, intoned the arrow. *'TWOULD SEEM 'TIS ALMOST TIME.*

'What?' I asked. Its voice sounded unusually subdued, almost sad.

I SAID NOTHING.

'You did too.'

I DIDST NOT! WE MUST NEEDS FORMULATE A NEW PLAN. I SHALL GO RIGHT. THOU SHALT GO LEFT.

'Okay,' I agreed. 'Wait. That won't work. You don't have legs.'

‘YOU CAN’T HIDE!’ Python bellowed. ‘YOU ARE NO GOD!’

This pronouncement hit me like a bucket of ice water. It didn’t carry the weight of prophecy, but it was true nonetheless. At the moment, I wasn’t sure *what* I was. I certainly wasn’t my old godly self. I wasn’t exactly Lester Papadopoulos, either. My flesh steamed. Pulses of light flickered under my skin, like the sun trying to break through storm clouds. When had that started?

I was between states, morphing as rapidly as Python himself. I was no god. I would never be the same old Apollo again. But, in this moment, I had the chance to decide what I would become, even if that new existence only lasted a few seconds.

The realization burned away my delirium.

‘I won’t hide,’ I muttered. ‘I won’t cower. That’s not who I will be.’

The arrow buzzed uneasily. *SO … WHAT IS THY PLAN?*

I grasped my ukulele by the fret board and held it aloft like a club. I raised the Arrow of Dodona in my other hand and burst from my hiding place. ‘CHARGE!’

At the time, this seemed like a completely sane course of action.

If nothing else, it surprised Python.

I imagined what I must have looked like from his perspective: a raggedy teenaged boy with ripped clothes and cuts and contusions everywhere, limping along with one bloody foot, waving a stick and a four-stringed instrument and screaming like a lunatic.

I ran straight at his massive head, which was too high for me to reach. I started smashing my ukulele against his throat. ‘Die!’ *CLANG!* ‘Die!’ *TWANG!* ‘Die!’ *CRACK-SPROING!*

On the third strike, my ukulele shattered.

Python’s flesh convulsed, but, rather than dying like a good snake, he wrapped a coil around my waist, almost

gently, and raised me to the level of his face.

His lamp-like eyes were as large as I was. His fangs glistened. His breath smelled of long-decayed flesh.

'Enough now.' His voice turned calm and soothing. His eyes pulsed in synch with my heartbeat. 'You fought well. You should be proud. Now you can relax.'

I knew he was doing that old reptile hypnosis trick – paralysing the small mammal so it would be easier to swallow and digest. And, in the back of my mind, some cowardly part of me (Lester? Apollo? Was there a difference?) whispered, *Yes, relaxing would feel really good right now.*

I *had* done my best. Surely, Zeus would see that and be proud. Maybe he would send down a lightning bolt, blast Python into tiny pieces and save me!

As soon as I thought this, I realized how foolish it was. Zeus didn't work that way. He would not save me any more than Nero had saved Meg. I had to let go of that fantasy. I had to save myself.

I squirmed and fought. I still had my arms free and my hands full. I stabbed Python's coil with my broken fretboard so forcefully that it ripped his skin and stuck in his flesh like a massive splinter, green blood oozing from the wound.

He hissed, squeezing me tighter, pushing all the blood into my head until I feared I would blow my top like a cartoon oil well.

'Has anyone ever told you,' Python rasped, 'that you are annoying?'

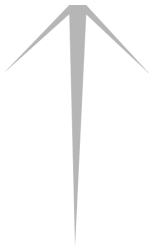
I HATH, the Arrow of Dodona said in a melancholy tone. *A THOUSAND TIMES.*

I couldn't respond. I had no breath. It took all my remaining strength to keep my body from imploding under the pressure of Python's grip.

'Well.' Python sighed, his breath washing over me like the wind from a battlefield. 'No matter. We have reached the

end, you and I.’

He squeezed harder, and my ribs began to crack.



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Found my shot. Took it.
Forgot I was tied to it.
Down I go. Bye-bye.

I FOUGHT.

I squirmed.

I pounded on Python's skin with my tiny fist, then wriggled my ukulele thorn back and forth in the wound, hoping to make him so miserable he would drop me.

Instead, his giant glowing eyes simply watched, calm and satisfied, as my bones developed stress fractures I could hear in my inner ear. I was a submarine in the Mariana Trench. My rivets were popping.

DIEST THOU NOT! the Arrow of Dodona implored me. *THE TIME HAS COME!*

'Wh–?' I tried to wheeze out a question, but I had too little air in my lungs.

THE PROPHECY WHICH PYTHON SPAKE, said the arrow. *IF THOU MUST FALL, THEN SO YOU SHALL, BUT FIRST, USETH THOU ME.*

The arrow tilted in my hand, pointing towards Python's enormous face.

My thought process was muddled, what with my brain exploding and all, but its meaning jabbed into me like a ukulele fretboard.

I can't, I thought. *No.*

THOU MUST. The arrow sounded resigned, determined. I thought about how many miles I had travelled with this small sliver of wood, and how little credence I'd usually given its words. I remembered what it had told me about it being cast out of Dodona – a small expendable branch from the ancient grove, a piece no one would miss.

I saw Jason's face. I saw Heloise, Crest, Money Maker, Don the Faun, Dakota – all those who had sacrificed themselves to get me here. Now my last companion was ready to pay the cost for my success – to have me do the one thing it had always told me never to do.

'No,' I croaked, possibly the last word I would ever be able to speak.

'What is that?' Python asked, thinking I had spoken to him. 'Does the little rat beg for mercy at the end?'

I opened my mouth, unable to answer. The monster's face loomed closer, anxious to savour my last sweet whimpers.

FARE THEE WELL, FRIEND, said the arrow. *APOLLO WILL FALL, BUT APOLLO MUST RISE AGAIN.*

With those last words, conveying all the power of his ancient grove, the arrow closed the reptile's prophecy. Python came within range, and with a sob of despair I jabbed the Arrow of Dodona up to its fletching in his enormous eye.

He roared in agony, lashing his head back and forth. His coils loosened just enough for me to wriggle free. I dropped, landing in a heap at the edge of a wide crevice.

My chest throbbed. Definitely broken ribs. Probably a broken heart. I had far exceeded the maximum recommended mileage for this Lester Papadopoulos body, but I had to keep going for the Arrow of Dodona. I hadeth to keepeth goingeth.

I struggled to my feet.

Python continued flailing, trying to dislodge the arrow from his eye. As a medical god, I could have told him that this would only make the pain worse. Seeing my old Shakespearean missile weapon sticking out of the serpent's head made me sad and furious and defiant. I sensed that the arrow's consciousness was gone. I hoped it had fled back to the Grove of Dodona and joined the millions of other whispering voices of the trees, but I feared it was simply no more. Its sacrifice had been real, and final.

Anger pumped through me. My mortal body steamed in earnest, bursts of light flashing under my skin. Nearby, I spotted Python's tail thrashing. Unlike the snake that had curled around the leontocephaline, *this* serpent had a beginning and an end. Behind me yawned the largest of the volcanic crevices. I knew what I had to do.

'PYTHON!' My voice shook the cavern. Stalactites crashed around us. I imagined, somewhere far above us, Greek villagers freezing in their tracks as my voice echoed from the ruins of the holy site, olive trees shuddering and losing their fruit.

The Lord of Delphi had awoken.

Python turned his remaining baleful eye on me. 'You will *not* live.'

'I'm fine with that,' I said. 'As long as you die, too.'

I tackled the monster's tail and dragged it towards the chasm.

'What are you doing?' he roared. 'Stop it, you idiot!'

With Python's tail in my arms, I leaped over the side.

My plan should not have worked. Given my puny mortal weight, I should have simply hung there like an air freshener from a rear-view mirror. But I was full of righteous fury. I planted my feet against the rock wall and pulled, dragging Python down as he howled and writhed. He tried to whip his tail around and throw me off, but my feet stayed firmly planted against the side of the chasm

wall. My strength grew. My body shone with brilliant light. With one final defiant shout, I pulled my enemy past the point of no return. The bulk of his coils spilled into the crevasse.

The prophecy came true. Apollo fell, and Python fell with me.

Hesiod once wrote that a bronze anvil would take nine days to fall from Earth to Tartarus.

I suspect he used the word *nine* as shorthand for *I don't know exactly how long, but it would seem like a long, long time.*

Hesiod was right.

Python and I tumbled into the depths, flipping over one another, bouncing against walls, spinning from total darkness into the red light of lava veins and back again. Given the amount of damage my poor body took, it seems likely that I died somewhere along the way.

Yet I kept fighting. I had nothing left to wield as a weapon, so I used my fists and feet, punching the beast's hide, kicking at every claw, wing or nascent head that sprouted from his body.

I was beyond pain. I was now in the realm of *extreme agony is the new feeling great* . I torqued myself in mid-air so that Python took the brunt of our collisions with the walls. We couldn't escape one another. Whenever we drifted apart, some force brought us back together again like marriage bonds.

The air pressure became crushing. My eyes bulged. The heat baked me like a batch of Sally Jackson's cookies, but still my body glowed and steamed, the arteries of light now closer to the surface, dividing me into a 3-D Apollo jigsaw puzzle.

The crevice walls opened around us, and we fell through the cold and gloomy air of Erebos – the realm of Hades. Python tried to sprout wings and fly away, but his pathetic

bat appendages couldn't support his weight, especially with me clinging to his back, breaking his wings as soon as they formed.

'STOP IT!' Python growled. The Arrow of Dodona still bristled in his ruined eye. His face oozed green blood from a dozen places where I had kicked and punched him. 'I – HATE – YOU!'

Which just goes to show that even arch-enemies of four thousand years can still find something to agree on. With a great *KA-PHROOOOOM!* we hit water. Or not water … More like a roaring current of bone-chillingly cold grey acid.

The River Styx swept us downstream.

If you love category-five rapids on a river that can drown you, dissolve your skin and corrode your sense of self all at the same time, I highly recommend a giant serpent cruise on the Styx.

The river sapped my memories, my emotions, my will. It prised open the burning cracks in my Lester Papadopoulos shell, making me feel raw and unmade like a moulting dragonfly.

Even Python was not immune. He fought more sluggishly. He flailed and clawed to reach the shore, but I elbowed him in his one good eye, then kicked him in the gullet – anything to keep him in the water.

Not that I wanted to drown, but I knew Python would be much more dangerous on solid ground. Also, I did not like the idea of showing up on Hades's doorstep in my present condition. I could expect no warm welcome there.

I clung to Python's face, using the Arrow of Dodona's lifeless shaft like a rudder, steering the monster with tugs of torture. Python wailed and bellowed and thrashed. All around us, the Styx's rapids seemed to laugh at me. *You see? You broke a vow. And now I have you.*

I held on to my purpose. I remembered Meg McCaffrey's last order: *Come back to me, dummy.* Her face remained

clear in my mind. She had been abandoned so many times, used so cruelly. I would not be another cause of grief for her. I knew who I was. I was her dummy.

Python and I tumbled through the grey torrent and then, without warning, shot off the edge of a waterfall. Again we fell, into even deeper oblivion.

All supernatural rivers eventually empty into Tartarus – the realm where primordial terrors dissolve and re-form, where monsters germinate on the continent-size body of Tartarus himself, slumbering in his eternal dream state.

We did not stop long enough for a selfie. We hurtled through the burning air and the spray of the abysmal waterfall as a kaleidoscope of images spun in and out of view: mountains of black bone like Titan scapulae; fleshy landscapes dotted with blisters that popped to release glistening newborn drakons and gorgons; plumes of fire and black smoke spewing upward in darkly festive explosions.

We fell even further, into the Grand Canyon crevasse of this horror world – to the deepest point of the deepest realm of creation. Then we slammed into solid rock.

Wow, Apollo, you marvel. *How did you survive?*

I didn't.

By that point, I was no longer Lester Papadopoulos. I was not Apollo. I'm not sure who or what I was.

I rose to my feet – I don't know how – and found myself on a blade of obsidian, jutting over an endless churning sea of umber and violet. With a combination of horror and fascination, I realized I was standing on the brink of Chaos.

Below us churned the essence of everything: the great cosmic soup from which all else had spawned, the place where life first began to form and think, *Hey, I am separate from the rest of this soup!* One step off this ledge, and I would rejoin that soup. I would be utterly gone.

I examined my arms, which seemed to be in the process of disintegration. The flesh burned away like paper, leaving

marbled lines of glowing golden light. I looked like one of those transparent anatomy dolls designed to illustrate the circulatory system. In the centre of my chest, subtler than the best MRI could capture, was a haze of roiling violet energy. My soul? My death? Whatever it was, the glow was getting stronger, the purple tint spreading through my form, reacting to the nearness of Chaos, working furiously to unknit the golden lines that held me together. That probably wasn't good …

Python lay beside me, his body also crumbling, his size drastically reduced. He was now only five times larger than me – like a prehistoric crocodile or constrictor, his shape a mixture of the two, his hide still rippling with half-formed heads, wings and claws. Impaled in his blind left eye, the Arrow of Dodona was still perfectly intact, not a bit of fletching out of place.

Python rose to his stubby feet. He stomped and howled. His body was coming apart, turning into chunks of reptile and light, and I must say I didn't like the new disco-crocodile look. He stumbled towards me, hissing and half-blind. 'Destroy you!'

I wanted to tell him to chill out. Chaos was way ahead of him. It was rapidly tearing apart our essences. We no longer had to fight. We could just sit on this obsidian spire and quietly crumble together. Python could cuddle up against me, look out over the vast expanse of Chaos, mutter *It's beautiful* , then evaporate into nothingness.

But the monster had other plans. He charged, bit me around the waist and barrelled forward, intent on pushing me into oblivion. I couldn't stop his momentum. I could only shuffle and twist so that when we hit the edge, Python tumbled over first. I clawed desperately at the rock, grabbing the rim as Python's full weight almost yanked me in half.

We hung there, suspended over the void by nothing but my trembling fingers, Python's maw clamped around my

waist.

I could feel myself being torn in two, but I couldn't let go. I channelled all my remaining strength into my hands – the way I used to do when I played the lyre or the ukulele, when I needed to express a truth so deep it could only be communicated in music: the death of Jason Grace, the trials of Apollo, the love and respect I had for my young friend Meg McCaffrey.

Somehow, I managed to bend one leg. I kneed Python in the chin.

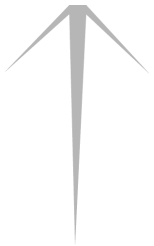
He grunted. I kneed him again, harder. Python groaned. He tried to say something, but his mouth was full of Apollo. I struck him once more, so hard I felt his lower jaw crack. He lost his grip and fell.

He had no final words – just a look of half-blind reptilian horror as he plummeted into Chaos and burst into a cloud of purple fizz.

I hung from the ledge, too exhausted to feel relief.

This was the end. Pulling myself up would be beyond my ability.

Then I heard a voice that confirmed my worst fears.



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Hanging with my peeps,
Hanging by my fingertips,
It's the same, really.

'I TOLD YOU SO.'

I never doubted those would be the last words I heard.

Next to me, the goddess Styx floated over the void. Her purple-and-black dress might have been a plume of Chaos itself. Her hair drifted like an ink cloud around her beautiful, angry face.

I wasn't surprised that she could exist here so effortlessly, in a place where other gods feared to go. Along with being the keeper of sacred oaths, Styx was the embodiment of the River of Hate. And, as anyone can tell you, hatred is one of the most durable emotions, one of the last to fade into nonexistence.

I told you so. Of course she had. Months ago at Camp Half-Blood, I had made a rash oath. I'd sworn on the River Styx not to play music or use a bow until I was a god again. I'd reneged on both counts, and the goddess Styx had been dogging my progress ever since, sprinkling tragedy and destruction wherever I went. Now I was about to pay the final price – I would be cancelled.

I waited for Styx to prise my fingers from the obsidian ledge, then give me a raspberry as I plummeted into the soupy, amorphous destruction below.

To my surprise, Styx wasn't done talking.

'Have you learned?' she asked.

If I hadn't felt so weak, I might have laughed. I had learned, all right. I was *still* learning.

At that moment, I realized I'd been thinking about Styx the wrong way all these months. She hadn't put destruction in my path. I'd caused it myself. She hadn't got me into trouble. I *was* the trouble. She had merely called out my recklessness.

'Yes,' I said miserably. 'Too late, but I get it now.'

I expected no mercy. Certainly, I expected no help. My little finger slipped free of the ledge. Nine more until I fell.

Styx's dark eyes studied me. Her expression was not gloating, exactly. She looked more like a satisfied piano teacher whose six-year-old pupil had finally mastered 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'.

'Hold on to that, then,' she said.

'What, the rock?' I murmured. 'Or the lesson?'

Styx made a sound that did not belong at the brink of Chaos: she chuckled with genuine amusement.

'I suppose you'll have to decide.' With that, she dissolved into smoke, which drifted upward towards the airy climes of Erebos.

I wished I could fly like that. But, alas, even here, at the precipice of nonexistence, I was subject to gravity.

At least I had vanquished Python.

He would never rise again. I could die knowing that my friends were safe. The Oracles were restored. The future was still open for business.

So what if Apollo was erased from existence? Maybe Aphrodite was right. Eleven Olympians was plenty. Hephaestus could pitch this as a reality TV show: *Eleven Is*

Enough. His streaming-service subscriptions would go through the roof.

Why couldn't I let go, then? I kept clinging to the edge with stubborn determination. My wayward pinky found its grip again. I had promised Meg I would return to her. I hadn't sworn it as an oath, but that didn't matter. If I said I would do it, I had to follow through.

Perhaps that was what Styx had been trying to teach me: it wasn't about how loudly you swore your oath, or what sacred words you used. It was about whether or not you meant it. And whether your promise was worth making.

Hold on, I told myself. *To both the rock and the lesson.*

My arms seemed to become more substantial. My body felt more *real.* The lines of light wove together until my form was a mesh of solid gold.

Was it just a last hopeful hallucination, or did I actually pull myself up?

My first surprise: I woke.

People who have been dissolved into Chaos typically don't do that.

Second surprise: my sister Artemis was leaning over me, her smile as bright as the harvest moon. 'Took you long enough,' she said.

I rose with a sob and hugged her tight. All my pain was gone. I felt perfect. I felt … I almost thought, *like myself again,* but I wasn't sure what that even meant any more.

I was a god again. For so long, my deepest desire had been to be restored. But instead of feeling elated I wept on my sister's shoulder. I felt like if I let go of Artemis, I would fall back into Chaos. Huge parts of my identity would shake loose, and I would never be able to find all the puzzle pieces.

'Whoa, there.' She patted my back awkwardly. 'Okay, little fella. You're all right now. You made it.'

She gently extricated herself from my arms. Not a cuddler, my sister, but she did allow me to hold her hands. Her stillness helped me stop trembling.

We were sitting together on a Greek-style sofa bed, in a white marble chamber with a columned terrace that opened onto a view of Olympus: the sprawling mountaintop city of the gods, high above Manhattan. The scent of jasmine and honeysuckle wafted in from the gardens. I heard the heavenly singing of the Nine Muses in the distance – probably their daily lunchtime concert in the agora. I really *was* back.

I examined myself. I wore nothing but a bedsheet from the waist down. My chest was bronze and perfectly sculpted. My muscular arms bore no scars or fiery lines glowing beneath the surface. I was gorgeous, which made me feel melancholy. I had worked hard for those scars and bruises. All the suffering my friends and I had been through …

My sister's words suddenly sank in: *Took you long enough.*

I choked on despair. 'How long?'

Artemis's silver eyes scanned my face, as if trying to determine what damage my time as a human had done to my mind. 'What do you mean?'

I knew immortals could not have panic attacks. Yet my chest constricted. The ichor in my heart pumped much too fast. I had no idea how long it had taken me to become a god again. I'd lost half a year from the time Zeus zapped me at the Parthenon to the time I plummeted to Manhattan as a mortal. For all I knew, my restorative siesta had taken years, decades, centuries. Everyone I'd known on Earth might be dead.

I could not *bear* that. 'How long was I out? What century is this?'

Artemis processed this question. Knowing her as well as I did, I gathered she was tempted to laugh, but hearing the

degree of hurt in my voice, she kindly thought better of it.

'Not to worry, Brother,' she said. 'Since you fought Python, only two weeks have passed.'

Boreas the North Wind could not have exhaled more powerfully than I did.

I sat upright, throwing aside my sheet. 'But what about my friends? They'll think I'm dead!'

Artemis studiously regarded the ceiling. 'Not to worry. We – I – sent them clear omens of your success. They know you have ascended to Olympus again. Now, please, put on some clothing. I'm your sister, but I would not wish this sight on anyone.'

'Hmph.' I knew very well she was just teasing me. Godly bodies are expressions of perfection. That's why we appear naked in ancient statuary, because you simply do not cover up such flawlessness with clothing.

Nevertheless, her comment resonated with me. I felt awkward and uncomfortable in this form, as if I'd been given a Rolls-Royce to drive but no car insurance to go with it. I'd felt so much more comfortable in my economy-compact Lester.

'I, um … Yes.' I gazed around the room. 'Is there a closet, or –?'

Her laughter finally escaped. 'A closet. That's adorable. You can just wish yourself into clothes, Little Brother.'

'I … ah …' I knew she was right, but I felt so flustered I even ignored her *little brother* comment. It had been too long since I'd relied on my divine power. I feared I might try and fail. I might accidentally turn myself into a camel.

'Oh, fine,' Artemis said. 'Allow me.'

A wave of her hand, and suddenly I was wearing a knee-length silver dress – the kind my sister's followers wore – complete with thigh-laced sandals. I suspected I was also wearing a tiara.

'Um. Perhaps something less Huntery?'

‘I think you look lovely.’ Her mouth twitched at the corner. ‘But very well.’

A flash of silver light, and I was dressed in a man’s white chiton. Come to think of it, that piece of clothing was pretty much identical to a Hunter’s gown. The sandals were the same. I seemed to be wearing a crown of laurels instead of a tiara, but those weren’t very different, either. Conventions of gender were strange. But I decided that was a mystery for another time.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘The others are waiting in the throne room. Are you ready?’

I shivered, though it should not have been possible for me to feel cold.

The others .

I remembered my dream of the throne room – the other Olympians gambling on my success or failure. I wondered how much money they’d lost.

What could I possibly say to them? I no longer felt like one of them. I *wasn’t* one of them.

‘In a moment,’ I told my sister. ‘Would you mind …?’

She seemed to understand. ‘I’ll let you compose yourself. I’ll tell them you’ll be right in.’ She kissed me lightly on the cheek. ‘I *am* glad you’re back. I hope I won’t regret saying that.’

‘Me, too,’ I agreed.

She shimmered and vanished.

I took off the laurel wreath. I did not feel comfortable wearing such a symbol of victory. I ran my finger across the gilded leaves, thinking of Daphne, whom I had treated so horribly. Whether Aphrodite had cursed me or not, it was still my fault that the blameless naiad had turned herself into a laurel tree just to escape me.

I walked to the balcony. I set the wreath on the edge of the railing, then ran my hand across the hyacinth that grew along the lattice – another reminder of tragic love. My poor

Hyacinthus. Had I *really* created these flowers to commemorate him, or just to wallow in my own grief and guilt? I found myself questioning many things I had done over the centuries. Strangely enough, this uneasiness felt somewhat reassuring.

I studied my smooth tan arms, wishing again that I had retained a few scars. Lester Papadopoulos had earned his cuts, bruises, broken ribs, blistered feet, acne … Well, perhaps not the acne. No one deserves that. But the rest had felt more like symbols of victory than laurels, and better commemorations of loss than hyacinths.

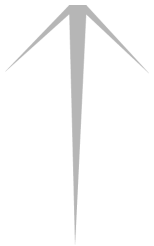
I had no great desire to be here in Olympus, my home that was not a home.

I wanted to see Meg again. I wanted to sit by the fire at Camp Half-Blood and sing ridiculous songs, or joke with the Roman demigods in the Camp Jupiter mess hall while platters of food flew over our heads and ghosts in glowing purple togas regaled us with tales of their former exploits.

But the world of demigods wasn't my place. I had been privileged to experience it, and I needed to remember it.

That didn't mean I couldn't go back to visit, though. But first I had to show myself to my family, such as they were. The gods awaited.

I turned and strode out of my room, trying to recall how the god Apollo walked.



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Hooray! Yippee! Yay!
Apollo is in the house.
Hold your applause, please.

WHY SO BIG?

I'd never really thought about it before, but after six months away, the Olympians' throne room struck me as ridiculously huge. The interior could have housed an aircraft carrier. The great domed ceiling, spangled with constellations, could have nested all the largest cupolas ever created by humans. The roaring central hearth was just the right size for rotisserie-cooking a pickup truck. And, of course, the thrones themselves were each the size of a siege tower, designed for beings that were twenty feet tall.

As I hesitated on the threshold, awestruck by the massiveness of it all, I realized I was answering my own question. The point of going big was to make our occasional guests feel small.

We didn't often allow lesser beings to visit us, but, when we did, we enjoyed the way their jaws dropped, and how they had to crane their necks to see us properly.

If we then chose to come down from our thrones and shrink to mortal size, so we could pull these visitors aside and have a confidential chat, or give them a pat on the back, it seemed like we were doing something really special for them, descending to their level.

There was no reason the thrones couldn't have been human-size, but then we would have seemed too human (and we didn't like being reminded of the resemblance). Or *forty* feet tall, but that would have been too awkward – too much shouting to make ourselves heard. We'd need magnifying glasses to see our visitors.

We could've even made the thrones six inches tall. Personally, I would have loved to see that. A demigod hero straggles into our presence after some horrible quest, takes a knee before an assembly of miniature gods, and Zeus squeaks in a Mickey Mouse voice, *Welcome to Olympus!*

As I thought all this, it dawned on me that the gods' conversations had stopped. They had all turned to look at me standing in the doorway. The entire squad was here today, which only happened on special occasions: the solstice, Saturnalia, the World Cup.

I had a moment's panic. Did I even know how to turn twenty feet tall any more? Would they have to summon a booster seat for me?

I caught Artemis's eye. She nodded – either a message of encouragement, or a warning that if I didn't hurry up and enchant myself, she would help by turning me into a twenty-foot-tall camel in an evening gown.

That gave me just the shot of confidence I needed. I strode into the room. To my great relief, my stature grew with every step. Just the right size, I took my old throne, directly across the hearth from my sister, with Ares on my right and Hephaestus on my left.

I met the eyes of each god in turn.

You have heard of imposter syndrome? Everything in me screamed *I am a fake! I do not belong here!* Even after four

thousand years of godhood, six months of mortal life had convinced me that I wasn't a true deity. Surely, these eleven Olympians would soon realize this unfortunate fact. Zeus would yell, *What have you done with the real Apollo?* Hephaestus would press a button on his gadget-encrusted chair. A trapdoor would open in the seat of my throne, and I would be flushed unceremoniously back to Manhattan.

Instead, Zeus simply studied me, his eyes stormy under his bushy black eyebrows. He'd chosen to dress traditionally today in a flowing white chiton, which was not a good look for him given the way he liked to manspread.

'You have returned,' he noted, supreme lord of stating the obvious.

'Yes, Father.' I wondered if the word *Father* sounded as bad as it tasted. I tried to control the bile rising inside me. I mustered a smile and scanned the other gods. 'So, who won the betting pool?'

Next to me, Hephaestus at least had the good manners to shift uncomfortably in his seat, though of course he was *always* uncomfortable. Athena shot a withering look at Hermes as if to say, *I told you that was a bad idea.*

'Hey, man,' Hermes said. 'That was just something to keep our nerves under control. We were worried about you!'

Ares snorted. 'Especially because of the way you were fumbling along down there. I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did.' His face turned red, as if he'd just realized he was speaking aloud. 'Uh … I mean, good job, man. You came through.'

'So you lost a bundle,' I summed up.

Ares cursed under his breath.

'Athena won the pot.' Hermes rubbed his back pocket, as if his wallet were still hurting.

'Really?' I asked.

Athena shrugged. 'Wisdom. It comes in handy.'

It should have been a commercial. The camera zooms in on Athena, who smiles at the screen as the promotional slogan appears below her: *Wisdom. It comes in handy.*

'So …' I spread my hands, signalling that I was ready to hear whatever: compliments, insults, constructive criticism. I had no idea what was on the agenda for this meeting, and I found I didn't much care.

On the other side of the room, Dionysus drummed his fingers on his leopard-skin-patterned armrests. Being the only god on the 'goddess side' of the assembly (long story), he and I often had staring contests or traded eye-rolls when our father got too long-winded. Dionysus was still in his slovenly Mr D guise, which annoyed Aphrodite, who sat next to him. I could tell from her body language that she wanted to squirm out of her Oscar de la Renta midi.

Given Dionysus's exile at Camp Half-Blood, he was rarely allowed to visit Olympus. When he did, he was usually careful not to speak unless spoken to. Today he surprised me.

'Well, I think you did a marvellous job,' he offered. 'I think, in your honour, *any* god who is currently being punished with a stint on Earth ought to be pardoned immediately –'

'No,' Zeus snapped.

Dionysus slumped back with a dejected sigh.

I couldn't blame him for trying. His punishment, like mine, seemed completely senseless and disproportionate. But Zeus worked in mysterious ways. We couldn't always know his plan. That was probably because he didn't *have* a plan.

Demeter had been weaving wheat stalks into new drought-resistant varieties, as she often did while listening to our deliberations, but now she set aside her basket. 'I agree with Dionysus. Apollo should be commended.'

Her smile was warm. Her golden hair rippled in an unseen breeze. I tried to spot any resemblance to her

daughter Meg, but they were as different as a kernel and a husk. I decided I preferred the husk.

'He made a wonderful slave to my daughter,' Demeter continued. 'True, it took him a while to adjust, but I can forgive that. If any of you need a slave in the future for your demigod children, I recommend Apollo without hesitation.'

I hoped this was a joke. But Demeter, like the growing season, was not known for her sense of humour.

'Thanks?' I said.

She blew me a kiss.

Gods, Meg, I thought. *I am so, so sorry your mom is your mom.*

Queen Hera lifted her veil. As I'd seen in my dream, her eyes were red and swollen from crying, but when she spoke her tone was as hard as bronze.

She glared at her husband. 'At least Apollo *did* something.'

'Not this again,' Zeus rumbled.

'My chosen,' Hera said. 'Jason Grace. Your *son.* And you –'

'*I* didn't kill him, woman!' Zeus thundered. 'That was Caligula!'

'Yes,' Hera snapped. 'And at least Apollo grieved. At least *he* got vengeance.'

Wait … What was happening? Was my wicked stepmother defending me?

Much to my shock, when Hera met my eyes, her gaze wasn't hostile. She seemed to be looking for solidarity, *sympathy* , even. *You see what I have to deal with? Your father is horrible!*

In that moment, I felt a twinge of compassion for my stepmother for the first time in, oh, ever. Don't get me wrong. I still disliked her. But it occurred to me that being Hera might not be so easy, given who she was married to. In her place, I might have become a bit of an impossible meddler, too.

‘Whatever the case,’ Zeus grumbled, ‘it does appear that after two weeks, Apollo’s fix is permanent. Python is truly gone. The Oracles are free. The Fates are once again able to spin their thread without encumbrance.’

Those words settled over me like Vesuvian ashes.

The Fates’ thread. How had I not considered this before? The three eternal sisters used their loom to spin the life-spans of both gods and mortals. They snipped the cord of destiny whenever it was time for someone to die. They were higher and greater than any Oracle. Greater even than the Olympians.

Apparently, Python’s poison had done more than simply strangle prophecies. If he could interfere with the Fates’ weaving as well, the reptile could have ended or prolonged lives as he saw fit. The implications were horrifying.

Something else struck me about Zeus’s statement. He had said it *appeared* my fix was permanent. That implied Zeus wasn’t sure. I suspected that when I fell to the edge of Chaos, Zeus had not been able to watch. There were limits to even *his* far sight. He did not know exactly what had happened, how I had defeated Python, how I’d come back from the brink. I caught a look from Athena, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

‘Yes, Father,’ I said. ‘Python is gone. The Oracles are free. I hope that meets with your approval.’

Having spent time in Death Valley, I was confident that my tone was much, much drier.

Zeus stroked his beard as if pondering the future’s endless possibilities. Poseidon stifled a yawn as if pondering how soon this meeting would end so he could get back to fly-fishing.

‘I am satisfied,’ Zeus pronounced.

The gods let out a collective sigh. As much as we pretended to be a council of twelve, in truth we were a tyranny. Zeus was less a benevolent father and more an

iron-fisted leader with the biggest weapons and the ability to strip us of our immortality if we offended him.

Somehow, though, I didn't feel relieved to be off Zeus's hook. In fact, I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

'Super,' I said.

'Yes,' Zeus agreed. He cleared his throat awkwardly. 'Welcome back to godhood, my son. All has gone according to my plan. You have done admirably. You are forgiven and restored to your throne!'

There followed a smattering of polite applause from the other deities.

Artemis was the only one who looked genuinely happy. She even winked at me. Wow. It truly was a day for miracles.

'What's the first thing you'll do now that you're back?' Hermes asked. 'Smite some mortals? Maybe drive your sun chariot too close to the Earth and smoke the place?'

'Ooh, can I come?' Ares asked.

I gave them a guarded shrug. 'I think I may just visit some old friends.'

Dionysus nodded wistfully. 'The Nine Muses. Excellent choice.'

But those weren't the friends I had in mind.

'Well, then.' Zeus scanned the room, in case any of us wanted one last chance to grovel at his feet. 'Council is dismissed.'

The Olympians popped out of existence one after the other – back to whatever godly mischief they'd been managing. Artemis gave me a reassuring nod, then dissolved into silvery light.

That left only Zeus and me.

My father coughed into his fist. 'I know you think your punishment was harsh, Apollo.'

I did not answer. I tried my best to keep my expression polite and neutral.

‘But you must understand,’ Zeus continued, ‘only *you* could have overthrown Python. Only *you* could have freed the Oracles. And you did it, as I expected. The suffering, the pain along the way … regrettable, but necessary. You have done me proud.’

Interesting how he put that: I had done *him* proud. I had been useful in making him look good. My heart did not melt. I did not feel that this was a warm-and-fuzzy reconciliation with my father. Let’s be honest: some fathers don’t deserve that. Some aren’t capable of it.

I suppose I could have raged at him and called him bad names. We were alone. He probably expected it. Given his awkward self-consciousness at the moment, he might even have let me get away with it unpunished.

But it would not have changed him. It would not have made anything different between us.

You cannot change a tyrant by trying to out-ugly him. Meg could never have changed Nero, any more than I could change Zeus. I could only try to be different from him. Better. More … human. And to limit the time I spent around him to as little as possible.

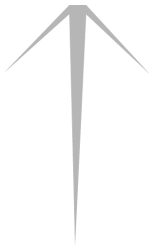
I nodded. ‘I understand, Father.’

Zeus seemed to understand that what *I* understood was not perhaps the same thing *he* understood, but he accepted the gesture, I suppose because he had little choice.

‘Very well. So … welcome home.’

I rose from my throne. ‘Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me …’

I dissolved into golden light. There were several other places I’d rather be, and I intended to visit them all.



37

Burnt marshmallow bliss,
Pinochle, and strawberries.
Love you, Camp Half-Blood.

AS A GOD, I COULD SPLIT MYSELF INTO multiple parts. I could exist in many different places at once.

Because of this, I can't tell you with absolute certainty which of the following encounters came first. Read them in any order you like. I was determined to see all my friends again, no matter where they were, and give them equal attention at roughly the same time.

First, though, I must mention my horses. No judgement, please. I had missed them. Because they were immortal, they did not need sustenance to survive. Nor did they absolutely have to make their daily journey through the sky in order to keep the sun going, thanks to all the other solar gods out there, still powering the movements of the cosmos, and that other thing called astrophysics. Still, I worried that my horses hadn't been fed or taken out for exercise in at least six months, perhaps a whole year, which tended to make them grumpy. For reasons I shouldn't have to explain, you don't want your sun being pulled across the sky by grumpy horses.

I materialized at the entrance of the sun palace and found that my valets had abandoned their posts. This happens when you don't pay them their gold drachma every day. I could barely push open the front door because months of mail had been shoved through the slot. Bills. Ad circulars. Credit card offers. Appeals for charities like Godwill and Dryads Without Borders. I suppose Hermes found it amusing to deliver me so much snail mail. I would have to have a talk with that guy.

I also hadn't put a stop to my automatic deliveries from the Amazons, so the portico was piled high with shipping boxes filled with toothpaste, laundry detergent, guitar strings, reams of blank tablature and coconut-scented suntan lotion.

Inside, the palace had reverted to its old Helios smell, as it did every time I was gone for an extended period. Its former owner had baked the place with the scent of Titan: pungent and saccharine, slightly reminiscent of Axe body spray. I'd have to open some windows and burn some sage.

A layer of dust had accumulated on my golden throne. Some jokers had written WASH ME on the back of the chair. Stupid venti, probably.

In the stables, my horses were glad to see me. They kicked at their stalls, blew fire and whinnied indignantly, as if to say, *Where the Hades have you been?*

I fed them their favourite gilded straw, then filled their nectar trough. I gave them each a good brushing and whispered sweet nothings in their ears until they stopped kicking me in the groin, which I took as a sign that they forgave me.

It felt good to do something so routine – something I'd done millions of times before. (Taking care of horses, I mean. Not getting kicked in the groin.) I still didn't feel like my old self. I didn't really *want* to feel like my old self. But being in my stables felt much more comfortable and familiar than being on Olympus.

I split myself into separate Apollos and sent one of me on my daily ride across the sky. I was determined to give the world a regular day, to show everyone that I was back at the reins and feeling good. No solar flares, no droughts or wildfires today. Just Apollo being Apollo.

I hoped that this part of me would serve as my steady rudder, my grounding force, while I visited my other stops.

The welcome I received at Camp Half-Blood was uproarious and beautiful.

'LESTER!' the campers chanted. 'LESTER!'

'LESTER?!'

'LESTER!'

I had chosen to appear in my old Papadopoulos form. Why not my glowing perfect god bod? Or one of the Bangtan Boys, or Paul McCartney circa 1965? After complaining for so many months about my flabby, acne-spotted Lester meat sack, I now found that I felt at home in that form. When I'd first met Meg, she had assured me that Lester's appearance was perfectly normal. At the time, the notion had horrified me. Now I found it reassuring.

'Hello!' I cried, accepting group hugs that threatened to deteriorate into stampedes. 'Yes, it's me! Yep, I made it back to Olympus!'

Only two weeks had passed, but the newbie campers who had seemed so young and awkward when I first arrived now carried themselves like demigod veterans. Going through a major battle (sorry, 'field trip') will do that to you. Chiron looked enormously proud of his trainees – and of me, as if I were one of them.

'You did well, Apollo,' he said, gripping my shoulder like the affectionate father I'd never had. 'You are always welcome here at camp.'

Ugly weeping would not have been appropriate for a major Olympian god, so that's exactly what I did.

Kayla, Austin and I hugged each other and wept some more. I had to keep my godly powers firmly under control, or my joy and relief might have exploded in a firestorm of happiness and obliterated the whole valley.

I asked about Meg, but they told me she had already left. She'd gone back to Palm Springs, to her father's old home, with Luguselwa and her foster siblings from Nero's Imperial Household. The idea of Meg handling that volatile group of demigods with only the help of LuBeard the Pirate made me uneasy.

'Is she well?' I asked Austin.

He hesitated. 'Yeah. I mean …' His eyes were haunted, as if remembering the many things we'd all seen and done in Nero's tower. 'You know. She *will* be.'

I set aside my worries for the moment and continued making rounds among my friends. If they felt nervous that I was a god again, they hid it well. As for me, I made a conscious effort to stay cool, not to grow twenty feet tall or burst into golden flames every time I saw someone I liked.

I found Dionysus sitting glumly on the porch of the Big House, sipping a Diet Coke. I sat down across from him at the pinochle table.

'Well,' he said with a sigh, 'it appears some of us do get happy endings.'

I think he was pleased for me, in his own way. At least, he tried to tamp down the bitterness in his voice. I couldn't blame him for feeling salty.

My punishment was over, yet his continued. A hundred years compared to my six months.

To be honest, though, I could no longer consider my time on Earth to have been a punishment. Terrible, tragic, nearly impossible … yes. But calling it a *punishment* gave Zeus too much credit. It had been a journey – an important one I made myself, with the help of my friends. I hoped … I *believed* that the grief and pain had shaped me into a better person. I had forged a more perfect Lester from the

dregs of Apollo. I would not trade those experiences for anything. And if I had been told I had to be Lester for another hundred years … well, I could think of worse things. At least I wouldn't be expected to show up at the Olympian solstice meetings.

'You will have your happy ending, Brother,' I told Dionysus.

He studied me. 'You speak as the god of prophecy?'

'No.' I smiled. 'Just as someone with faith.'

'Surely not faith in our father's wisdom.'

I laughed. 'Faith in our ability to write our own stories, regardless of what the Fates throw at us. Faith that you will find a way to make wine out of your sour grapes.'

'How deep,' Dionysus muttered, though I detected a faint smile at the corners of his mouth. He gestured to his game table. 'Pinochle, perhaps? At that, at least, I know I can dominate you.'

I stayed with him that afternoon, and he won six games. He only cheated a little.

Before dinner, I teleported to the Grove of Dodona, deep within the camp's forest.

Just as before, the ancient trees whispered in a cacophony of voices – snatches of riddles and songs, bits of doggerel (some of it actually about dogs), recipes and weather reports, none of it making much sense. Brass wind chimes twisted in the branches, reflecting the evening light and catching every breeze.

'Hello!' I called. 'I came to thank you!'

The trees continued to whisper, ignoring my presence.

'You gave me the Arrow of Dodona as my guide!' I continued.

I detected a tittering of laughter among the trees.

'Without the arrow,' I said, 'my quest would have failed. It sacrificed itself to defeat Python. Truly, it was the greatest in all the grove!'

If the trees could have made a screechy rewind noise, I'm sure they would have. Their whispering died away. The brass chimes hung lifeless in the branches.

'Its wisdom was invaluable,' I said. 'Its sacrifice noble. It represented you with honour. I will certainly tell this grove's guardian, my grandmother Rhea, all about its great service. She will hear what you did – that when I needed aid, you sent your best.'

The trees began whispering again, more nervously this time. *Wait. Wait, we didn't … What?*

I teleported away before they could see me smile. I hoped that wherever its spirit was, my friend the arrow was having a laugh worthy of a Shakespearean comedy.

That night, after the campfire, I sat watching the embers burn down with Nico, Will and Rachel.

The boys sat comfortably next to each other, Will's arm around Nico's shoulder, as the son of Hades twirled a burnt marshmallow on a stick. Next to me, Rachel hugged her knees and stared contentedly at the stars, the dying fire reflecting in her red hair like a charging herd of tauri silvestres.

'Everything's working again,' she told me, tapping the side of her head. 'The visions are clear. I can paint. I've issued a couple of prophecies already. No more snake poison in my mind. Thank you.'

'I'm glad,' I said. 'And your parents' destroyed house?'

She laughed. 'Turned out to be a good thing. Before, my dad had wanted me to stay around here in the fall. Now, he says maybe it's a good idea if I do what I wanted to begin with. Gonna take a gap year in Paris to study art while they rebuild the house.'

'Oh, Paris!' Will said.

Rachel grinned. 'Right? But don't worry, I'll be back here next summer to dish out more oracular awesomeness.'

‘And if we need you in the meantime,’ Nico said, ‘there’s always shadow-travel.’

Will sighed. ‘I’d love to think you’re suggesting a date night in Paris, Mr Dark Lord. But you’re still thinking about Tartarus, aren’t you? Hoping for some prophetic guidance?’

Nico shrugged. ‘Unfinished business …’

I frowned. It seemed like so long ago they had mentioned this to me – Nico’s compulsion to explore the depths of Tartarus, the voice he had heard, calling for help.

I didn’t want to open fresh wounds, but I asked as gently as I could, ‘You’re sure it’s not … Jason?’

Nico picked at his blackened marshmallow. ‘I won’t lie. I’ve wondered about that. I’ve thought about trying to find Jason. But, no, this isn’t about him.’ He snuggled a little closer to Will. ‘I have a sense that Jason made his choice. I wouldn’t be honouring his sacrifice if I tried to undo it. With Hazel … She was just drifting in Asphodel. I could tell she wasn’t supposed to be there. She *needed* to come back. With Jason, I have a feeling he’s somewhere better now.’

‘Like Elysium?’ I wondered. ‘Rebirth?’

‘I was hoping you could tell me,’ Nico admitted.

I shook my head. ‘I’m afraid I’m clueless about after-death matters. But if it’s not Jason you’re thinking about …?’

Nico twirled his s’more stick. ‘When I was in Tartarus the first time, somebody helped me. And I – *we* left him down there. I can’t stop thinking about him.’

‘Should I be jealous?’ Will asked.

‘He’s a Titan, dummy,’ Nico said.

I sat up straight. ‘A *Titan* ?’

‘Long story,’ Nico said. ‘But he’s not a bad guy. He’s … Well, I feel like I should look for him, see if I can figure out what happened. He might need my help. I don’t like it when people are overlooked.’

Rachel bunched up her shoulders. ‘Hades wouldn’t mind you traipsing down to Tartarus?’

Nico laughed without humour. ‘He’s expressly forbidden it. After that business with the Doors of Death, he doesn’t want anybody in Tartarus ever again. That’s where the troglodytes come in. They can tunnel anywhere, even there. They can get us in and out safely.’

‘*Safely* being a relative term,’ Will noted, ‘given that the whole idea is bonkers.’

I frowned. I still didn’t like the idea of my sunshiny son skipping off into the land of monster nightmares. My recent tumble to the edge of Chaos had reminded me what a terrible travel destination it was. Then again, it wasn’t my place to tell demigods what to do, especially those I loved the most. I didn’t want to be that kind of god any more.

‘I wish I could offer you help,’ I said, ‘but I’m afraid Tartarus is outside my jurisdiction.’

‘It’s okay, Dad,’ Will said. ‘You’ve done your part. No story ever ends, does it? It just leads into others.’ He laced his fingers through Nico’s. ‘We’ll handle whatever comes next. Together. With or without a prophecy –’

I swear I had nothing to do with it. I did not press a button on Rachel’s back. I did not prearrange a surprise gift from Delphic Deliveries.

But as soon as Will said the word *prophecy* , Rachel went rigid. She inhaled sharply. A green mist rose from the earth, swirling around her and coiling into her lungs. She tipped over sideways while Nico and Will lunged to catch her.

As for me, I scrambled away in a very ungodlike manner, my heart beating like a frightened Lester. I guess all that green gas reminded me too much of my recent quality time with Python.

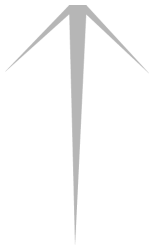
By the time my panic subsided, the prophetic moment had passed. The gas had dissipated. Rachel lay comfortable on the ground, Will and Nico both standing over her with perturbed looks.

‘Did you hear it?’ Nico asked me. ‘The prophecy she whispered?’

‘I – I didn’t,’ I admitted. ‘Probably better if … if I let you two figure this one out.’

Will nodded, resigned. ‘Well, it didn’t sound good.’

‘No, I’m sure it didn’t.’ I looked down fondly at Rachel Dare. ‘She’s a wonderful Oracle.’



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Carrots and muffins,
Sally's fresh-baked blue cookies.
I am so hungry.

THE WAYSTATION FELT SO DIFFERENT IN the summer.

Emmie's rooftop garden was bursting at the seams with tomatoes, peas, cabbage and watermelon. The great hall was bursting at the seams with old friends.

The Hunters of Artemis were in residence, having taken quite a beating on their most recent excursion to catch the Teumessian Fox.

'That fox is murder,' said Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano, rubbing her bruised neck. 'Led us right into a den of werewolves, the little punk.'

'Ugh,' agreed Thalia Grace, pulling a werewolf tooth out of her leather cuirass. 'TF spreads destruction everywhere he goes.'

'TF?' I asked.

'Easier than saying *Teumessian Fox* twenty times a day,' Thalia told me. 'Anyway, the fox runs through a town and stirs up every monster within twenty miles. Peoria is pretty much in ruins.'

This sounded like a tragic loss, but I was more concerned with my Hunter buddies.

'Are you regretting your decision to join up?' I asked Reyna.

She grinned. 'Not for a minute. This is fun!'

Thalia punched her in the shoulder. 'Great Hunter, this one. I knew she would be. We'll get that fox one of these days.'

Emmie called to them from the kitchen to help with dinner, because the carrots weren't going to dice themselves. The two friends strode off together, laughing and sharing stories. It did my heart good to see them so happy, even if their version of fun was a never-ending foxhunt that destroyed large portions of the Midwest.

Jo was teaching Georgina, their daughter (and possibly mine, too), to forge weapons in the smithy. When Georgina saw me, she looked unexcited, as if we'd just parted a few minutes ago. 'You keep my doll?' she demanded.

'Ah …' I could have lied. I could have magically produced an exact likeness of the pipe-cleaner figure and said *Of course.* But the truth was that I had no idea where the little guy had ended up, perhaps in Delphi or Tartarus or Chaos? I told her the truth. 'Would you make me another one?'

Georgina thought about this. 'Nah.'

Then she went back to quenching hot blades with her mom.

The swordsman Lityerses seemed to be adjusting well. He was overseeing an 'elephant visitation programme' with Waystation resident Livia and Hannibal from Camp Jupiter. The two pachyderms were romping around together in the back lot, flirting by throwing medicine balls at each other.

After dinner, I got to visit with Leo Valdez, who had just straggled back home after a full day of community service. He was teaching homeless kids shop skills at a local shelter.

'That's amazing,' I said.

He grinned, biting off a chunk of Emmie's fresh-made buttermilk scones. 'Yeah. Bunch of kids like me, you know? They never had much. Least I can show them somebody cares. Plus, some of them are excellent mechanics.'

'Don't you need tools?' I asked. 'A shop?'

'Festus!' Leo said. 'A bronze dragon makes the best mobile shop. Most of the kids just see him as a truck, with the Mist and all, but a few of them ... they know what's up.'

Jo passed by on her way to the griffin lofts and patted him on the shoulder. 'Doing good, this one. He's got potential.'

'Thanks, Mom,' Leo said.

Jo scoffed, but she looked pleased.

'And Calypso?' I asked Leo.

A flurry of emotions passed across his face – enough to tell me that Leo was more lovesick than ever over the former goddess, and things were still complicated.

'Yeah, she's good,' he said at last. 'I've never seen anyone actually *like* high school before. But the routine, the homework, the people ... She ate it up. I guess it's just so different from being stuck on Ogygia.'

I nodded, though the idea of an ex-immortal liking high school didn't make much sense to me either. 'Where is she now?'

'Band camp.'

I stared. 'Excuse me?'

'She's a counsellor at a band camp,' Leo said. 'Like, for regular mortal kids who are practising music and stuff. I don't know. She's gone all summer.'

He shook his head, clearly worried, clearly missing her, perhaps having nightmares about all the hot clarinet-player counsellors Calypso might be hanging around with.

'It's all good,' he said, forcing a smile. 'You know, a little time apart to think. We'll make it work.'

Reyna passed by and heard the last part. 'Talking about Calypso? Yeah, I had to have a heart-to-heart with mi hermano here.' She squeezed Leo's shoulder. 'You don't call

a young lady *mamacita.* You got to have more respect, entiendes?'

'I –' Leo looked ready to protest, then seemed to think better about it. 'Yeah, okay.'

Reyna smiled at me. 'Valdez grew up without his mom. Never learned these things. Now he's got two great foster moms and a big sister who isn't afraid to smack him when he gets out of line.' She flicked a finger playfully against his cheek.

'Ain't that the truth,' Leo muttered.

'Cheer up,' Reyna said. 'Calypso will come around. You're a doofus sometimes, Valdez, but you've got a heart of Imperial gold.'

Next stop: Camp Jupiter.

It did not surprise me that Hazel and Frank had become the most efficient and respected pair of praetors ever to run the Twelfth Legion. In record time they had inspired a rebuilding effort in New Rome, repaired all the damage from our battle against Tarquin and the two emperors, and started a recruitment drive with Lupa's wolves to bring in new demigods from the wild. At least twenty had arrived since I left, which made me wonder where they'd all been hiding, and how busy my fellow gods must have been in the last few decades to have so many children.

'We're going to install more barracks over there,' Hazel told me, as she and Frank gave me the five-denarius tour of the repaired camp. 'We've expanded the thermal baths, and we're constructing a victory arch on the main road into New Rome to commemorate our defeat of the emperors.' Her amber eyes flashed with excitement. 'It's going to be plated with gold. *Completely* over the top.'

Frank smiled. 'Yeah. As far as we can tell, Hazel's curse is officially broken. We did an augury at Pluto's shrine, and it came up favourable. She can summon jewels, precious

metals … and use them or spend them now without causing *any* curses.'

'But we're not going to abuse that power,' Hazel hastened to add. 'We'll only use it to improve the camp and honour the gods. We're not going to buy any yachts or private aeroplanes or big golden necklaces with "H plus F 4Ever" diamond pendants, are we, Frank?'

Frank pouted. 'No. I guess not.'

Hazel ribbed him.

'No, definitely not,' Frank amended. 'That would be tacky.'

Frank still lumbered along like a friendly grizzly bear, but his posture seemed more relaxed, his mood more cheerful, as if it were starting to sink in that his destiny was no longer controlled by a small piece of firewood. For Frank Zhang, like the rest of us, the future was open for business.

He brightened. 'Oh, and check this out, Apollo!'

He swirled his purple praetor's cloak like he was about to turn into a vampire bat (which Frank was fully capable of doing). Instead, the cloak simply turned into an oversize sweater wrap. 'I figured it out!'

Hazel rolled her eyes. 'My sweet, sweet Frank. Could you please *not* with the sweater wrap?'

'What?' Frank protested. 'It's impenetrable *and* comfortable!'

Later that day, I visited my other friends. Lavinia Asimov had made good on her threat/promise to teach the Fifth Cohort to tap-dance. The unit was now feared and respected in the war games for their ability to form a testudo shield wall while doing the three-beat shuffle.

Tyson and Ella were happily back at work in their bookshop. The unicorns were still weaponized. The Jason Grace temple-expansion plan was still moving forward, with new shrines being added every week.

What did surprise me: Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase had arrived and taken up residence in New Rome, giving

them two months to adjust to their new environs before the fall semester of their freshman year in college.

'Architecture,' Annabeth said, her grey eyes as bright as her mother's. She said the word *architecture* as if it were the answer to all the world's problems. 'I'm going to focus on environmental design at UC Berkeley while dual-enrolling at New Rome University. By year three, I figure –'

'Whoa, there, Wise Girl,' Percy said. 'First you have to help me get through freshman English. And math. And history.'

Annabeth's smile lit up the empty dorm room. 'Yeah, Seaweed Brain, I know. We'll take the basics together. But you *will* do your own homework.'

'Man,' Percy said, looking at me for commiseration. 'Homework.'

I was pleased to see them doing so well, but I agreed with him about homework. Gods never got it. We didn't want it. We just assigned it in the form of deadly quests.

'And your major?' I asked him.

'Yeah, uh … marine biology? Aquaculture? I dunno. I'll figure it out.'

'You're both staying here?' I gestured at the bunk beds. New Rome University may have been a college for demigods, but its dorm rooms were as basic and uninspired as any other university's.

'*No* .' Annabeth sounded offended. 'Have you seen the way this guy throws his dirty clothes around? Gross. Besides, dorms are required for all freshmen and they aren't co-ed. My roommate probably won't arrive until September.'

'Yeah.' Percy sighed. 'Meanwhile, I'll be all the way across campus in this empty boys' dormitory. Two whole blocks away.'

Annabeth swatted his arm. 'Besides, Apollo, our living arrangements are none of your business.'

I held up my hands in surrender. ‘But you did travel across the country together to get here?’

‘With Grover,’ Percy said. ‘It was great, just the three of us again. But, man, that road trip …’

‘Kind of went sideways,’ Annabeth agreed. ‘And up, down and diagonal. But we made it here alive.’

I nodded. This was, after all, about the most that could be said for any demigod trip.

I thought about my own trip from Los Angeles to Camp Jupiter, escorting the coffin of Jason Grace. Percy and Annabeth both seemed to read my thoughts. Despite the happy days ahead of them, and the general spirit of optimism at Camp Jupiter, sadness still lingered, hovering and flickering at the corners of my vision like one of the camp’s Lares.

‘We found out when we arrived,’ Percy said. ‘I still can’t …’

His voice caught. He looked down and picked at his palm.

‘I cried myself sick,’ Annabeth admitted. ‘I still wish … I wish I’d been there for Piper. I hope she’s doing okay.’

‘Piper is a tough young lady,’ I said. ‘But yes … Jason. He was the best of us.’

No one argued with that.

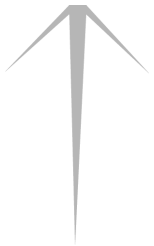
‘By the way,’ I said, ‘your mother is doing well, Percy. I just saw her and Paul. Your little sister is entirely too adorable. She never stops laughing.’

He brightened. ‘I know, right? Estelle is awesome. I just miss my mom’s baking.’

‘I might be able to help with that.’ As I had promised Sally Jackson, I teleported a plate of her fresh-baked blue cookies straight into my hands.

‘Dude!’ Percy stuffed a cookie in his mouth. His eyes rolled up in ecstasy. ‘Apollo, you’re the best. I take back almost everything I’ve said about you.’

‘It’s quite all right,’ I assured him. ‘Wait … what do you mean, *almost* ?’



39

Two hundred and ten
Is a lot of haiku, but
I can do more if –
*(*insert the sound of a god being strangled here*)*

SPEAKING OF PIPER MCLEAN, I EMBARRASSED myself when I popped in to visit her.

It was a lovely summer night in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. The stars were out by the millions and cicadas chirred in the trees. Heat settled over the rolling hills. Fireflies glowed in the grass.

I had willed myself to appear wherever Piper McLean might be. I ended up standing on the flat roof of a modest farmhouse – the McLean ancestral home. At the edge of the roof, two people sat shoulder to shoulder, dark silhouettes facing away from me. One leaned over and kissed the other.

I didn't mean to, but I was so flustered I flashed like a camera light, inadvertently changing from Lester to my adult Apollo form – toga, blond hair, muscles and all. The two lovebirds turned to face me. Piper McLean was on the left. On the right sat another young lady with short dark

hair and a rhinestone nose stud that winked in the darkness.

Piper unlaced her fingers from the other girl's. 'Wow, Apollo. Timing.'

'Er, sorry. I –'

'Who's this?' the other girl asked, taking in my bedsheet clothing. 'Your dad has a boyfriend?'

I suppressed a yelp. Since Piper's dad was Tristan McLean, former A-list heartthrob of Hollywood, I was tempted to say *Not yet, but I'm willing to volunteer.* I didn't think Piper would appreciate that, though.

'Old family friend,' Piper said. 'Sorry, Shel. Would you excuse me a sec?'

'Uh. Sure.'

Piper got up, grabbed my arm and guided me to the far end of the roof. 'Hey. What's up?'

'I … Uh …' I had not been this tongue-tied since I'd been a full-time Lester Papadopoulos. 'I just wanted to check in, make sure you're doing okay. It seems you are?'

Piper gave me a hint of a smile. 'Well, early days.'

'You're in process,' I said, remembering what she had told me in California. Suddenly, much of what she and I had talked about started to make sense. Not being defined by Aphrodite's expectations. Or Hera's ideas of what a perfect couple looked like. Piper finding her own way, not the one people expected of her.

'Exactly,' she said.

'I'm happy for you.' And I was. In fact, it took effort for me not to glow like a giant firefly. 'Your dad?'

'Yeah, I mean … from Hollywood back to Tahlequah is a big change. But he seems like he's found some peace. We'll see. I heard you got back on Olympus. Congratulations.'

I wasn't sure if congratulations were in order, given my general restlessness and feelings of unworthiness, but I nodded. I told her what had happened with Nero. I told her about Jason's funeral.

She hugged her arms. In the starlight, her face looked as warm as bronze fresh from Hephaestus's anvil. 'That's good,' she said. 'I'm glad Camp Jupiter did right by him. You did right by him.'

'I don't know about that,' I said.

She laid her hand on my arm. 'You haven't forgotten. I can tell.'

She meant about being human, about honouring the sacrifices that had been made.

'No,' I said. 'I won't forget. The memory is part of me now.'

'Well, then, good. Now, if you'll excuse me …'

'What?'

She pointed back to her friend Shel.

'Oh, of course. Take care of yourself, Piper McLean.'

'You too, Apollo. And next time maybe give me a heads-up before popping in?'

I muttered something apologetic, but she had already turned to go – back to her new friend, her new life and the stars in the sky.

The last and hardest reunion … Meg McCaffrey.

A summer day in Palm Springs. The dry, blistering heat reminded me of the Burning Maze, but there was nothing malicious or magical about it. The desert simply got hot.

Aeithales, the former home of Dr Phillip McCaffrey, was an oasis of cool, verdant life. Tree limbs had grown to reshape the once fully man-made structure, making it even more impressive than it had been in Meg's childhood. Annabeth would have been blown away by the local dryads' environmental design. Windows had been replaced by layers of vines that opened and closed automatically for shade and cool, responding to the winds' smallest fluctuations. The greenhouses had been repaired and were now packed with rare specimens of plants from all around Southern California. Natural springs filled the cisterns and

provided water for the gardens and a cooling system for the house.

I appeared in my old Lester form on the pathway from the house to the gardens and was almost skewered by the Meliai, Meg's personal troupe of seven super dryads.

'Halt!' they yelled in unison. 'Intruder!'

'It's just me!' I said, which didn't seem to help. 'Lester!' Still nothing. 'Meg's old, you know, servant.'

The Meliai lowered their spear points.

'Oh, yes,' said one.

'Servant of the Meg,' said another.

'The weak, insufficient one,' said a third. 'Before the Meg had *our* services.'

'I'll have you know I'm a full Olympian god now,' I protested.

The dryads did not look impressed.

'We will march you to the Meg,' one said. 'She will pass judgement. Double-time!'

They formed a phalanx around me and herded me up the path. I could have vanished or flown away or done any number of impressive things, but they had surprised me. I fell into my old Lester-ish habits and allowed myself to be force-marched to my old master.

We found her digging in the dirt alongside her former Nero family members – showing them how to transplant cactus saplings. I spotted Aemillia and Lucius, contentedly caring for their baby cacti. Even young Cassius was there, though how Meg had tracked him down, I had no idea. He was joking with one of the dryads, looking so relaxed I couldn't believe he was the same boy who had fled from Nero's tower.

Nearby, at the edge of a newly planted peach orchard, the karpos Peaches stood in all his diapered glory. (Oh, sure. He showed up *after* the danger had passed.) He was engaged in a heated conversation with a young female karpos whom I assumed was a native of the area. She

looked much like Peaches himself, except she was covered in a fine layer of spines.

‘Peaches,’ Peaches told her.

‘Prickly Pear!’ the young lady rejoined.

‘Peaches!’

‘Prickly Pear!’

That seemed to be the extent of their argument. Perhaps it was about to devolve into a death match for local fruit supremacy. Or perhaps it was the beginning of the greatest love story ever to ripen. It was hard to tell with karpoi.

Meg did a double take when she saw me. Her face split in a grin. She wore her pink Sally Jackson dress, topped with a gardening hat that looked like a mushroom cap. Despite the protection, her neck was turning red from the work outdoors.

‘You’re back,’ she noted.

I smiled. ‘You’re sunburned.’

‘Come here,’ she ordered.

Her commands no longer held force, but I went to her anyway. She hugged me tight. She smelled like prickly pear and warm sand. I might have got a little teary-eyed.

‘You guys keep at it,’ she told her trainees. ‘I’ll be back.’

The former imperial children looked happy to comply. They actually seemed determined to garden, as if their sanity depended on it, which perhaps it did.

Meg took my hand and led me on a tour of the new estate, the Meliai still in our wake. She showed me the trailer where Herophile the Sibyl now lived when she wasn’t working in town as a Tarot card reader and crystal healer. Meg boasted that the former Oracle was bringing in enough cash to cover all of Aeithales’s expenses.

Our dryad friends Joshua and Aloe Vera were pleased to see me. They told me about their work travelling across Southern California, planting new dryads and doing their best to heal the damage from the droughts and wildfires. They had lots of work still to do, but things were looking

up. Aloe followed us around for a while, lathering Meg's sunburnt shoulders with goo and chiding her.

Finally, we arrived in the house's main room, where Luguselwa was putting together a rocking chair. She'd been fitted with new mechanical hands, compliments, Meg told me, of the Hephaestus cabin at Camp Half-Blood.

'Hey, cellmate!' Lu grinned. She made a hand gesture that was usually not associated with friendly greeting. Then she cursed and shook her metal fingers until they opened into a proper wave. 'Sorry about that. These hands haven't quite been programmed right. Got a few kinks to work out.'

She got up and wrapped me in a bear hug. Her fingers splayed and started tickling me between the shoulder blades, but I decided this must be unintentional, as Lu didn't strike me as the tickle type.

'You look well,' I said, pulling away.

Lu laughed. 'I've got my Sapling here. I've got a home. I'm a regular old mortal again, and I wouldn't have it any other way.'

I stopped myself from saying *Me, too.* The thought made me melancholy. It would have been inconceivable to the old Apollo, but the idea of ageing in this lovely desert tree house, watching Meg grow into a strong and powerful woman … that didn't sound bad at all.

Lu must have picked up on my sadness. She gestured back to the rocking chair. 'Well, I'll let you two get on with the tour. Assembling this IKEA furniture is the toughest quest I've had in years.'

Meg took me out to the terrace as the afternoon sun sank behind the San Jacinto Mountains. My sun chariot would just now be heading towards home, the horses getting excited as they sensed the end of their journey. I would be joining them soon … reuniting with my other self, back at the Palace of the Sun.

I looked over at Meg, who was wiping a tear from her eye. 'You can't stay, I guess,' she said.

I took her hand. ‘Dear Meg.’

We remained like that in silence for a while, watching the demigods work in the gardens below.

‘Meg, you’ve done so much for me. For all of us. I … I promised to reward you when I became a god again.’

She started to speak, but I interrupted.

‘No, wait,’ I said. ‘I understand that would cheapen our friendship. I cannot solve mortal problems with a snap of my fingers. I see that you don’t want a reward. But you will always be my friend. And if you ever need me, even just to talk, I will be here.’

Her mouth twitched. ‘Thanks. That’s good. But … actually, I would be okay with a unicorn.’

She had done it again. She could still surprise me. I laughed, snapped my fingers, and a unicorn appeared on the hillside below us, whinnying and scratching the ground with its gold-and-pearl hooves.

She threw her arms around me. ‘Thanks. You’ll still be my friend, too, right?’

‘As long as you’ll still be mine,’ I said.

She thought about this. ‘Yeah. I can do that.’

I don’t recall what else we talked about. The piano lessons I had promised her. Different varieties of succulents. The care and feeding of unicorns. I was just happy to be with her.

At last, as the sun went down, Meg seemed to understand it was time for me to leave.

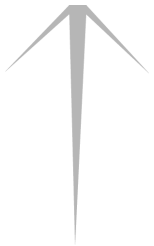
‘You’ll come back?’ she asked.

‘Always,’ I promised. ‘The sun always comes back.’

So, dear reader, we have come to the end of my trials. You have followed me through five volumes of adventures and six months of pain and suffering. By my reckoning, you have read two hundred and ten of my haiku. Like Meg, you surely deserve a reward.

What would you accept? I am fresh out of unicorns. However, any time you take aim and prepare to fire your best shot, any time you seek to put your emotions into a song or poem, know that I am smiling on you. We are friends now.

Call on me. I will be there for you.



Guide to Apollo-speak

Achilles a Greek hero of the Trojan War who was killed by an arrow shot into his heel, his one vulnerable spot

Aelian an early third-century-CE Roman author who wrote sensational stories about strange events and miraculous occurrences and was best known for his book *On the Nature of Animals*

Agrippina the Younger an ambitious and bloodthirsty Roman empress who was Nero's mother; she was so domineering towards her son that he ordered her killed

ambrosia a food of the gods that can heal demigods if eaten in small doses; it tastes like the user's favourite food

amphisbaena a snake with a head at each end, born from the blood that dripped from Medusa's severed head

Anicetus Nero's loyal servant, who carried out the order to kill Agrippina, Nero's mother

Aphrodite Greek goddess of love and beauty. Roman form: Venus

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera. Roman form: Mars

Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin of Apollo. Roman form: Diana

Asclepius the god of medicine; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing centre of Ancient Greece

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom. Roman form: Minerva

Athena Parthenos a forty-foot-tall statue of the goddess Athena that was once the central figure in the Parthenon of Athens. It currently stands on Half-Blood Hill at Camp Half-Blood.

Bacchus Roman god of wine and revelry; son of Jupiter. Greek form: Dionysus

Battle of Manhattan the climactic final battle of the Second Titan War

Benito Mussolini an Italian politician who became the leader of the National Fascist Party, a paramilitary organization. He ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943, first as a prime minister and then as a dictator.

boare Latin equivalent of *boo*

Boreas god of the North Wind

Caligula the nickname of the third of Rome's emperors, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, infamous for his cruelty and carnage during the four years he ruled, from 37 to 41 CE ; he was assassinated by his own guard

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located in Long Island, New York

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located in California, between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills

Celestial bronze a powerful magical metal used to create weapons wielded by Greek gods and their demigod children

Celtic relating to a group of Indo-European peoples identified by their cultural similarities and use of languages such as Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and

others, including pre-Roman Gaulish **centaur** a race of creatures that is half human, half horse. They are excellent archers.

Chaos the first primordial deity and the creator of the universe; a shapeless void below even the depths of Tartarus

Cistern a refuge for dryads in Palm Springs, California

cohort a group of legionnaires

Commodus Lucius Aurelius Commodus was the son of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; he became co-emperor when he was sixteen and emperor at eighteen, when his father died; he ruled from 177 to 192 CE and was megalomaniacal and corrupt; he considered himself the New Hercules and enjoyed killing animals and fighting gladiators at the Colosseum **Cumaean Sibyl** an Oracle of Apollo from Cumae who collected her prophetic instructions for averting disaster in nine volumes but destroyed six of them when trying to sell them to Tarquinius Superbus of Rome **Cyclops** (**Cyclopes** , pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

cynocephalus (**cynocephali** , pl.) a being with a human body and a dog's head

Daedalus a Greek demigod, the son of Athena and inventor of many things, including the Labyrinth, where the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept **Dante** an Italian poet of the late Middle Ages who invented terza rima; author of *The Divine Comedy* , among other works

Daphne a beautiful naiad who attracted Apollo's attention; she transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape him

Deimos Greek god of fear

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos

denarius (**denari** , pl.) a unit of Roman currency

Diana the Roman goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Jupiter and Leto, and the twin of Apollo.

Greek form: Artemis

Didyma the oracular shrine to Apollo in Miletus, a port city on the western coast of modern-day Turkey

dimachaerus (**dimachaeri** , pl.) a Roman gladiator trained to fight with two swords at once

Dionysus Greek god of wine and revelry; the son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus

drachma a unit of Ancient Greek currency

drakon a gigantic yellow-and-green serpentlike monster, with frills around its neck, reptilian eyes and huge talons; it spits poison

dryad a spirit (usually female) associated with a certain tree

Elysium the paradise to which Greek heroes are sent when the gods grant them immortality

Erebos the Greek primordial god of darkness; a place of darkness between Earth and Hades

fasces a ceremonial axe wrapped in a bundle of thick wooden rods with its crescent-shaped blade projecting outwards; the ultimate symbol of authority in Ancient Rome; origin of the word *fascism*

Fates three female personifications of destiny. They control the thread of life for every living thing from birth to death.

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where people who were evil during their lives are sent to face eternal punishment for their crimes after death **Gaia** the Greek earth goddess; wife of Ouranos; mother of the Titans, giants, Cyclopes and other monsters

Ganymede a beautiful Trojan boy whom Zeus abducted to be cupbearer to the gods

Gaul the name that Romans gave to the Celts and their territories

Germanus (**Germani** , pl.) a bodyguard for the Roman Emperor from the Gaulish and Germanic tribal people

who settled to the west of the Rhine river

glámon the Ancient Greek equivalent of *dirty old man*

Golden Fleece this hide from a gold-haired winged ram was a symbol of authority and kingship; it was guarded by a dragon and fire-breathing bulls; Jason was tasked with obtaining it, resulting in an epic quest. It now hangs on Thalia's tree at Camp Half-Blood to help strengthen the magical borders.

Greek fire a magical, highly explosive, viscous green liquid used as a weapon; one of the most dangerous substances on Earth

Grey Sisters Tempest, Anger and Wasp, a trio of old women who share a single eye and a single tooth and operate a taxi that serves the New York City area **griffin** a flying creature that is part lion, part eagle

Grove of Dodona the site of the oldest Greek Oracle, second only to Delphi in importance; the rustling of trees in the grove provided answers to priests and priestesses who journeyed to the site. The grove is located in Camp Half-Blood Forest and accessible only through the myrmekes' lair.

Hades the Greek god of death and riches; ruler of the Underworld. Roman form: Pluto

Harpocrates the god of silence

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hecate goddess of magic and crossroads

Helios the Titan god of the sun; son of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire, including volcanic, and of crafts and blacksmithing; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan **Hera** the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister; Apollo's stepmother

Hermes Greek god of travellers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Roman form: Mercury

Herophile the Oracle of Erythraea; she spouts prophecies in the form of word puzzles

Hestia Greek goddess of the hearth

Hunters of Artemis a group of maidens loyal to Artemis and gifted with hunting skills and eternal youth as long as they reject men for life

Hyacinthus a Greek hero and Apollo's lover, who died while trying to impress Apollo with his discus skills

Icarus the son of Daedalus, best known for flying too close to the sun while trying to escape the island of Crete by using metal-and-wax wings invented by his father; he died when he didn't heed his father's warnings **Imperial gold** a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Julius Caesar a Roman politician and general whose military accomplishments extended Rome's territory and ultimately led to a civil war that enabled him to assume control of the government in 49 BCE . He was declared 'dictator for life' and went on to institute social reforms that angered some powerful Romans. A group of senators conspired against him and assassinated him on 15 March, 44 BCE .

Jupiter the Roman god of the sky and king of the gods. Greek form: Zeus

karpos (**karpoi** , pl.) grain spirit; a child of Tartarus and Gaia

King Midas a ruler who was famous for being able to turn everything he touched into gold, an ability granted by Dionysus

Koronis one of Apollo's girlfriends, who fell in love with another man. A white raven Apollo had left to guard her informed him of the affair. Apollo was so angry at the raven for failing to peck out the man's eyes that he cursed the bird, scorching its feathers. Apollo sent his

sister, Artemis, to kill Koronis, because he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Kronos the Titan lord of time, evil and the harvest. He is the youngest but boldest and most devious of Gaia's children; he convinced several of his brothers to aid him in the murder of their father, Ouranos. He was also Percy Jackson's primary opponent. Roman form: Saturn

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur

Lar (**Lares** , pl.) Roman house gods

leontocephaline a being with the head of a lion and the body of a man entwined with a snake without a head or tail; created by Mithras, a Persian god, to protect his immortality **Leto** mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood

Lugus one of the major gods in ancient Celtic religion

Lupa the wolf goddess, guardian spirit of Rome

Mars the Roman god of war. Greek form: Ares

Marsyas a satyr who lost to Apollo after challenging him in a musical contest, which led to Marsyas being flayed alive

Meliai Greek nymphs of the ash tree, born of Gaia; they nurtured and raised Zeus in Crete

Mercury Roman god of travellers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Greek form: Hermes

Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena

Minoans a Bronze Age civilization of Crete that flourished from c. 3000 to 1100 BCE ; their name comes from King Minos

Minotaur the half-man, half-bull son of King Minos of Crete; the Minotaur was kept in the Labyrinth, where he killed people who were sent in; he was finally defeated by Theseus **Mist** a magical force that prevents mortals from seeing gods, mythical creatures and supernatural

occurrences by replacing them with things the human mind can comprehend **Mithras** a Persian god who was adopted by the Romans and became the god of warriors; he created the leontocephaline

Morpheus the Titan who put all the mortals in New York to sleep during the Battle of Manhattan

Mount Olympus home of the Twelve Olympians

naiad a female water spirit

nectar a drink of the gods that can heal demigods

Nero ruled as Roman Emperor from 54 to 58 CE ; he had his mother and his first wife put to death; many believe he was responsible for setting a fire that gutted Rome, but he blamed the Christians, whom he burned on crosses; he built an extravagant new palace on the cleared land and lost support when construction expenses forced him to raise taxes; he committed suicide **New Rome** both the valley in which Camp Jupiter is located and a city – a smaller, modern version of the imperial city – where Roman demigods can go to live in peace, study and retire **Nine Muses** goddesses who grant inspiration for and protect artistic creation and expression; daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne; as children, they were taught by Apollo. Their names are: Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Ourania and Calliope.

nymph a female deity who animates nature

omphalos Greek for *navel of the world* ; the nickname for Delphi, a spring that whispered the future to those who would listen

Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo

pandos (**pandai** , pl.) a man with gigantic ears, eight fingers and toes, and a body covered with hair that starts out white and turns black with age

pegasus (**pegasi** , pl.) a winged divine horse; sired by Poseidon, in his role as horse-god

Peleus father of Achilles; his wedding to the sea nymph Thetis was well attended by the gods, and a disagreement between them at the event eventually led to the Trojan War; the guardian dragon at Camp Half-Blood is named after him **Persephone** the Greek goddess of springtime and vegetation; daughter of Zeus and Demeter; Hades fell in love with her and abducted her to the Underworld to become his wife and queen of the Underworld **Phaethon** the demigod son of Helios, Titan of the Sun; he accidentally scorched the Earth when he drove Helios's sun chariot, and Zeus killed him with lightning as a result **Pluto** the Roman god of death and ruler of the Underworld. Greek form: Hades

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and the brother of Zeus and Hades. Roman form: Neptune

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

Primordial Chaos the first thing ever to exist; a void from which the first gods were produced

princeps Latin for *first citizen* or *first in line* ; the early Roman emperors adopted this title for themselves, and it came to mean *prince of Rome*

Pythia the priestess of Apollo's prophecies; the name given to every Oracle of Delphi

Python a monstrous serpent that Gaia appointed to guard the Oracle at Delphi

River Styx the river that forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld

roc an enormous bird of prey

Sassanid gas a chemical weapon the Persians used against the Romans in wartime

Saturnalia an Ancient Roman festival held in December in honour of the god Saturn, the Roman equivalent of Kronos

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man

scusatemi Italian for *excuse me*

shadow-travel a form of transportation that allows creatures of the Underworld and children of Hades to use shadows to leap to any desired place on Earth or in the Underworld, although it makes the user extremely fatigued **Sibyl** a prophetess

sica (**siccae** , pl.) a short, curved sword

Socrates a Greek philosopher (c. 470–399 BCE) who had a profound influence on Western thought

Stygian iron a magical metal forged in the River Styx, capable of absorbing the very essence of monsters and injuring mortals, gods, Titans and giants; has a significant effect on ghosts and creatures from the Underworld **Styx** a powerful water nymph; the eldest daughter of the sea Titan, Oceanus; goddess of the Underworld's most important river; goddess of hatred; the River Styx is named after her **Sutro Tower** a massive red-and-white transmission antenna in the San Francisco Bay Area where Harpocrates, the god of silence, was imprisoned by Commodus and Caligula **Tarquin** Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was the seventh and final king of Rome, reigning from 534 to 509 BCE , when, after a popular uprising, the Roman Republic was established

Tartarus husband of Gaia; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; the darkest pit in the Underworld, where monsters go when they are slain

taurus silvestris (**tauri silvestres** , pl.) a forest bull with an impenetrable hide; ancestral enemy of the troglodytes

Terpsichore Greek goddess of dance; one of the Nine Muses

terza rima a form of verse consisting of three-line stanzas in which the first and third lines rhyme and the middle line rhymes with the first and third lines of the following stanza **testudo** a tortoise battle formation in which legionnaires put their shields together to form a barrier

Teumessian Fox a gigantic fox sent by the Olympians to prey upon the children of Thebes; it is destined never to be caught
Thalia the Muse of comedy
Three Graces the three charities: Beauty, Mirth and Elegance; daughters of Zeus
Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaia and Ouranos, that ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians **triumvirate** a political alliance formed by three parties
troglodytes a race of subterranean humanoids who eat lizards and fight bulls
Trojan War according to legend, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta **Trophonius** demigod son of Apollo, designer of Apollo's temple at Delphi and spirit of the dark Oracle; he decapitated his half brother Agamethus to avoid discovery after their raid on King Hyrieus's treasury **Troy** a pre-Roman city situated in modern-day Turkey; site of the Trojan War
Underworld the kingdom of the dead, where souls go for eternity; ruled by Hades
ventus (**venti** , pl.) storm spirits
Venus the Roman goddess of love and beauty. Greek form: Aphrodite
Vnicornes Imperant Latin for *Unicorns Rule*
Vulcan the Roman god of fire, including volcanic, and of crafts and blacksmithing. Greek form: Hephaestus
Waystation a place of refuge for demigods, peaceful monsters and Hunters of Artemis located above Union Station in Indianapolis, Indiana
Zeus the Greek god of the sky and the king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

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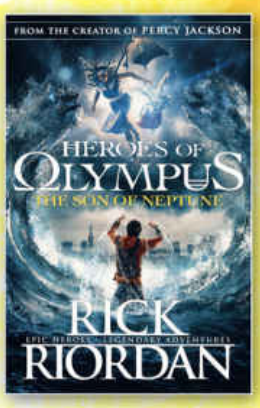

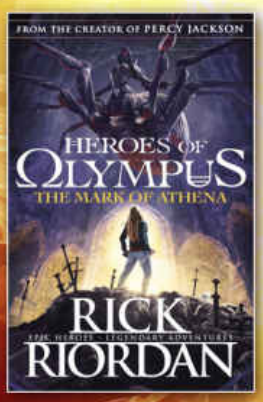

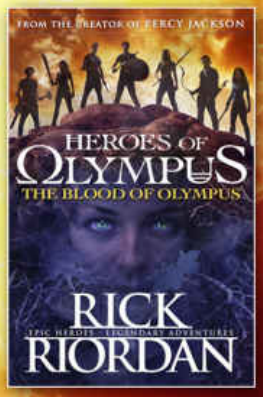

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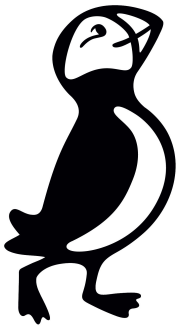

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